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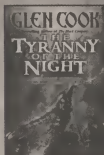
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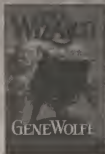
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*Matthew Hughes first introduced us to the noöonaut Guth Bandar in "A Little Learning" in our June 2004 issue. (You can find the story online at [www.archonate.com](http://www.archonate.com).) Since then we've followed Guth's adventures as they have taken him through some strange sections of the collective unconscious and gotten him kicked out of the Institute. Now we find him working in his uncle's housewares emporium when trouble comes seeking him again....*

*Mr. Hughes was born in Liverpool just a few years after those lads McCartney and Lennon, but unlike them, he emigrated to Canada at the age of five. His novels are all set in the Penultimate Age of Old Earth, one eon before the age of Jack Vance's Dying Earth. The growing legions of fans of Mr. Hughes's work will be pleased to know that a new novel featuring Henghis Hapthorn, Majestrum, is due out by the time this issue hits the newsstands.*

# Bye the Rules

*By Matthew Hughes*



UTH BANDAR SPENT THE morning attending to occasional customers in his Uncle Fley's housewares vendory and, between those encounters, constructing a decorative display of insipitators. The devices had lately become hugely popular among the inhabitants of Boderel, a self-contained district of the ancient city of Olkney on whose main thoroughfare stood Bandar's Mercantile Emporium and to which Guth Bandar had returned after being dismissed from his post as an adjunct scholar at the Institute for Historical Inquiry.

At first, he had stacked the insipitators in a pyramid, but soon realized that the arrangement was a deterrent to their purchase. Shoppers must take only the topmost item, or risk an avalanche of the squat, rotund appliances. And since Bandar had needed to mount a folding step to position the pyramid's upper strata, the customer who could reach for the apex insipitator would have to be freakishly tall. After two purchasers had required him to fetch and unfold the step so he could hand them down the highest item, he realized his error and tore down the stack. He rearranged



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the devices on a series of terraced shelves, allowing persons of varying heights to reach the insipitator that was closest to hand.

Bandar sighed heavily as he labored. He found the work tedious and dull, far less interesting than had been his explorations of the noösphere, the grand collective unconscious of humanity, whose study was the purpose of the venerable Institute. But that phase of his life now lay behind a door that had slammed shut, to remain forever sealed against him.

His longstanding academic rival, the detestable Didrick Gabbris, had roused the Institute's Grand Colloquium. Faculty, students, and alumni had unanimously rejected Bandar's heretical contention that the Commons, as the collective unconscious was known to scholars, had paradoxically achieved consciousness of itself — and not only self-awareness, but a will to act.

Worse than heretical, the scholars found the idea to be novel. And being offered to a conclave of academics on the ancient planet Old Earth, where no new idea had emerged in scores of millennia, it was received with shock, outrage, and derision. Gabbris had skillfully orchestrated the different streams of opprobrium, playing the Grand Colloquium as a conductor leads an orchestra, achieving at the end a crescendo of repudiation that sped a thoroughly disgraced Guth Bandar back to Boderel.

A plurality of the Boderel district's inhabitants were adherents of the Concord of Astringency, a philosophical system that prized rigorous sobriety and self-denial. For the past several years there had been a gradual loosening of the Concord's strictures, accompanied even by the use of sweeteners in the weekly ceremonial of the gruel, but now a new First Locutor had wrested the leadership from the backsliders and launched a wave of reform. Astringents were once again wearing uncomfortable fabrics and eating only foods whose flavor had been removed by insipitators. As he stacked and sold the devices, Bandar thought to see a convergence between his situation and that of his customers: he found his new life both tasteless and a source of chafing.

He was mulling this thought when the who's-there at the emporium's front door chirped the first words of its customary greeting to an incoming customer, then abruptly changed its tone and choice of words; its percepts had recognized that the tall, thin man coming through the portal was Fley Bandar, the proprietor.



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Guth Bandar left the insipitator display and went to greet his relative, putting on as cheerful a face as he could manage. After all, his troubles were no fault of his uncle's and the man had been generous to take him in and give him a livelihood. "Ho, uncle," he said, "the insipitators are moving well. You may need to order fresh stock."

Ordinarily, such news should have gladdened Fley Bandar's being, since he was a commerciant to his core and lived to sell useful products at a decent mark-up. But now Bandar saw that the older man's face remained long, his brows pulled into a troubled vee and his lips downdrawn at the corners.

"What is the matter?" Bandar said.

He received only a sigh for an answer. Fley took his customary seat on a stool behind the device that recorded transactions, bowed his grayed head and clasped his hands across his midriff. After a moment, he looked up at his nephew and said, "There is a problem."

Bandar instantly felt an urge to assist his uncle in meeting the challenge. He had noticed that whenever the older man faced a challenge, be it so minor as a need to rearrange the merchandise in the front display area, Bandar experienced a surge of motivation and felt good about himself when he was able to make a contribution.

"What is the problem?" he said. "How may I assist you?"

Fley spread his hands in a gesture of bewilderment. "There has been a change," he said.

"A change?" Bandar's face arranged itself into an icon of befuddlement. "What change? There is never a change."

He spoke from the authority of universal knowledge. In Olkney, nothing ever changed. Eons before, history had come to a complete and final end. Everything that could be tried had been tried, all possible forms had been established, filled with content, then emptied and refilled countless times. There was not, could not be, anything new under the fading orange light of the senescent sun. "What can have changed?"

"Tshimshim Barr-Chevry has sold up and moved offworld. A new man has taken over his enterprise. He has announced a program of direct competition with us. It was the talk of the guild meeting this morning."

Bandar blinked. "What does it mean, direct competition? Are we to run races, do puzzles in our heads?"

His uncle sighed. "I asked similar questions and was told this: the new incumbent will sell the same goods as we, but at lower prices. Also, he will offer inducements. For example, persons who purchase the new man's insipitators will receive a corrugated pillow, free of charge."

"Madness," Bandar said. "Barr-Chevry's does not sell insipitators. They sell immovables and interactive decor. Thus has it always been, through all the generations of Barr-Chevrys."

"Not anymore," said Fley. "Apparently, the latest iteration of the Barr-Chevry line had long harbored a secret desire to roam the open savannahs of distant worlds, places where moons pass through the skies and strange scents waft on the breezes."

Bandar made a fricative noise of dismissal. "We all have our fantasies. I dreamed of being a noönaut; much good it did me."

"Tshimshim Barr-Chevry has converted his fantasy into a ticket on a spaceliner that lifted off before dawn. By now he has passed through the first whimsy and will shortly be halfway down The Spray."

Fley let out a deep breath, rose and walked a few paces, then turned and retraced his steps, his thin legs bending at the knee and his elongated feet slapping the well-worn floor. His head was bowed and his brows knit.

"Who is this new man?" Bandar said. "Perhaps he is unaware of how things are done. We can arrange for his erroneous views to be corrected."

"That is the strangest part," said Fley, pausing in his perambulations and turning to his nephew. "He is only a placeholder, employed by the true purchaser of the enterprise, who sits behind a shield of anonymity."

"You're saying the owner does not operate the business? I've never heard the like."

Fley sighed again and resumed his pacing. "It is decidedly peculiar," he said. "Yet, there it is. The issue before us is: how to respond?"

Bandar felt another flash of incentive. "You must fight," he said. "And I must stand with you."

Fley rang a finger down his lengthy nose while his eyebrows performed a shrug. "I suppose we must," he said. "It's good of you to take my side, Guth."

"It's what I'm here for," said Guth Bandar and was surprised to find how deeply rang those simple words in his being. "Now, what we need is a plan."

\*\*\*

"I wish to inquire as to the proprietorship of a business," Bandar told the integrator at the Archonate Bureau of Cognizance.

"Why do you want to know?"

"How is my motive relevant?"

"Are you saying it is not?" said the bland voice. Bandar was alone in the small booth yet the words seemed to be spoken in the air just behind his left ear. "You seek information in which you have no interest? This seems a feckless pursuit. Are you normally governed by your every passing whim?"

Bandar had heard about the Archonate's integrators. Some had been in continuous service for durations more closely measured by geological periods than by human lifetimes, even the lengthy spans of Old Earth's inhabitants in this, the planet's penultimate age. The devices developed quirks and odd enthusiasms, and some of them appeared to take a perverse delight in putting difficulties in the way of the citizens they purported to serve.

"My motive is concern for the wellbeing of a close relative," Bandar said.

"How so?"

Reluctantly, Bandar explained the circumstances, knowing that each detail might send the integrator off on a wild tangent, requiring perhaps an entire afternoon to work it back to the point of his inquiry. Fortunately, however, the device was as nonplused by the news of the new policy at Barr-Chevry's as he had been.

"What is the alleged purpose of this competition?" the integrator asked.

"That has not been made known to us, only the fact of its existence."

"But this smacks of disruptive behavior. Commerciant affairs in Olkney achieved optimum stability during the Archonate of Terfel III. Why disturb perfection?"

"Exactly," said Bandar.

"Hmmm," said the integrator.

"Might this transaction be illegal?"

There was a pause while the device consulted eons of codified law. "It appears not."

"But it is not a trend the Archonate would wish to encourage."

The integrator's tone grew distant. "It is not a trend at all, merely an instance. Perhaps someone has gone mad."

"So an appeal to the Archon is not indicated?"

"It rarely is," said the integrator.

Bandar knew that the Archon was empowered to do anything at all to anyone at all, although ordinarily he was disinclined to interfere in the balance of affairs. "Yet this situation might constitute an imbalance, or at least the beginning of one," he said.

"Indeed." The integrator was silent for a moment, then said, "Do you wish to hear my optimum counsel?"

"That is why I came."

"Very well. Keep in mind that the Archon sits at the very pinnacle of the social order. His view of what is best and proper originates from a unique perspective. Those who invite his intervention can sometimes receive much more help than they anticipated. Indeed, occasionally it is more help than they can bear."

"What do you mean?"

"For example," said the integrator, "there was the dispute between two aristocratic families that occupied the large island in Mornedy Sound. They disagreed bitterly as to which should have precedence over the other. After an escalating series of violent incidents, culminating in arson and mayhem, they appealed to the Archon Barthelmeon VIII for a judgment."

"Wait a moment," said Bandar, "there is no large island in Mornedy Sound."

"Exactly," said the integrator. "Now, do you wish to involve the Archon in your uncle's dispute?"

"Perhaps not."

"Then, good day."

"At least give me the information I first asked for: the name of the new owner of Barr-Chevry's Immovables."

"Very well." The integrator then made a sound that indicated mild interest. "There has been some attempt to disguise the ownership through a chain of reciprocal hand-offs and cut-outs — not an entirely clumsy attempt, at that, but the trail leads back to one person."

"And that person is?"

"His name is Didrick Gabbris."

"Why do you torment my uncle?" Bandar said. Didrick Gabbris voiced no reply, merely placed his nose in an elevated position and made to step away. But Bandar seized the man's elbow through the sleeve of his academic robe, spun him around and repeated the question.

He had intercepted Gabbris beneath the stand of tittering hissol trees in the smaller quadrangle of the Institute of Historical Inquiry. It was late afternoon. Gabbris had just finished hearing a pack of undergraduates deliver the results of their conjectural flights — or "hunchmanship" as the exercise was colloquially known — and was now on his way to the masters' lesser conclave that would occupy the hour before the bell called all to dinner. Bandar had come directly from Olkney by hired aircar to find his old enemy fast-stepping through dappled orange sunlight, doubtless with thoughts of spiced cordial and seeded buns foremost in his mind.

"I am not answerable to you," Gabbris said. He sought to pull his arm from Bandar's grip but could not. He looked around for help but saw only a gaggle of students from his hunchmanship session, all of whom seemed interested in seeing their tutor accosted, none of whom showed an inclination to intervene.

Bandar increased the pressure of his grip. "Expect no aid," he said. "You have never inspired sympathy."

"Let go of me or it will go ill with you," Gabbris said.

Bandar made a noise that mingled derision with hate. "What will you do?" he said. "Have me expelled? You forget, you have already taken from me all that I ever desired. That now leaves you face to face with an angry man who has nothing to lose. I also point out that, though you are taller, I am wiry and well coordinated. Finally, I am mightily motivated to cause you pain and humiliation."

"I would see you clapped into a cell in the Archon's contemplarium," Gabbris said, but the squeak in his voice leached any power from his threat.

"Indeed?" said Bandar, letting his expression assume a thoughtful aspect. "And what I'd be contemplating would be the memory of your



tear-stained face, blood and mucous streaming from its disarranged nose, as I stood over you and applied the toe of my boot to the softest parts of your person."

"You wouldn't dare."

Bandar yanked on Gabbris's arm to position his enemy while he turned his free hand into a fist and drew it back in preparation for launch. A hoot of anticipation came from the undergraduates.

"Wait!" Gabbris said.

"Only long enough for you to answer my question."

The scholar tried again to pull his arm free but the motion was more petulant than determined. "Very well," he said. "It came to me in a dream."

"A lucid dream?"

"Of course."

"Ambiguous?"

"Not to a noönaut." Gabbris's lips slid back into their habitual sneer and his brows rose to their usual supercilious heights to offer Bandar an unspoken corollary: *Which you are not.*

Bandar released the man's arm and uncocked his fist. A tenured fellow of the Institute could not be faulted for acting upon a clear message from the unconscious. "What was the import?" he said.

"That the enmity between us must continue. You must be further punished, through your uncle."

Bandar made a gesture of bewilderment. "It makes no sense," he said. "What has Fley done to merit a penalty?"

"I do not question what comes from the Commons," Gabbris said.

Bandar snorted. "That needs no assertion. You are as accepting as a...." His mind offered him a rude and scatological image but he did not voice it.

"Are we done?" Gabbris said. "I desire a cordial and some conversation." He stressed the next three words: "With my peers."

"Surely you recognize that this role that has been assigned to you is consistent with my contention that the Commons has achieved self-awareness and is pursuing an agenda."

Gabbris waved away the supposition like a man brushing off a lethargic fly. "That again?" he said. "The only consistency I recognize is your continual harping on a self-deluding fantasy."

"But why else would you be urged to trouble me, now that you have won and I have lost?"

"The Commons is its own rationale." Gabbribs quoted. "It is the constant mirror in which we are but flickering reflections, ephemeral and substanceless. We do not question what comes from its depths; rather, we act and accept the consequences."

Bandar drew himself up to the slight height that his small stature could achieve. "Very well," he said, "but know that I return home to seek a lucid dream of my own, and if it should counsel me to wreak havoc on your repulsive carcass, be assured that havoc will be thoroughly wreaked."

IT WAS LATE in the evening by the time Guth Bandar made his way back from the Institute. All during the ride on the balloon tram and the subsequent long walk through the streets of Olkney, thronged with indentors and their spouses promenading their fashionable attire, coiffures, and skin coloration, he had mulled what Gabbribs had told him. A portion of his mind niggled at him, holding out a tantalizing whiff of some forgotten but crucial factum that was the key to unlock the mystery. But each time he rallied his normally well disciplined and biddable memory, it shied away from the target like a missile that did not care to make impact.

His uncle had already retired upstairs to his sleeping chamber. Bandar went to his small room at the back of his uncle's vendory, reposed himself upon the sleeping pallet and cleared his consciousness. He slowed his breathing and placed his limbs in the approved positions, then closed his eyes and summoned a mental image of a staircase with himself at the top and shadows beneath. Releasing a long sigh of breath, he pictured himself descending, step by step, at a measured pace. Within moments he found himself in a familiar setting.

He was walking along the main concourse of the Institute's New Quadrangle, an ancient labyrinth in whose warren of rooms senior fellows tutored mid-level students in the intricacies of the Commons's myriad Locations and the subtle techniques by which they could be entered and exited. The wide hallway was lined on either side by doors that led into rooms great or small, the former for lectures, the latter for exercises in meditation. As Bandar strode along, he noticed that one door a short

distance down the concourse was limned in rosy, golden light. He stepped to it and pulled it open.

A warm effulgence bathed him. He entered and with the crossing of the threshold came memory — though it arrived, not as a helpmate ready to serve, but as an unwelcome intruder. He turned to retreat back through the door but found that the portal was gone. Once again, he was in a formless mist, out of which came the ever shifting shape of the Multifacet: that representation of the collective unconscious that had paradoxically become conscious, and that had chosen Guth Bandar, whether he wished it or not, to be the instrument of its will.

"You have done this," Bandar said. "You have sicced the odious Gabbriis on my good uncle, who has done none harm and merits no punishment."

He spoke to a cartoonish representation of an animal wearing an odd hat and some sort of ribbon that went around its neck and hung down its front — Bandar thought the original species must be long extinct — that replied in a buffoonish voice that changed in midsentence to a cackle as the form became a warty crone. "We are no respecter of persons. We do what must be done."

"If you wish my help," Bandar said, "then enlist me. Do not coerce me by threatening those I love."

"We do as we must," said the Multifacet, becoming a roly-poly fellow in scarlet tunic and trousers accented by white fur and a matching tasseled hat. "You must be shaped, and we must use the tools at hand."

"What if I refuse?"

A little girl in pigtails and pinafore looked up at him and said, "We will seek another, but the train of events has already begun and your uncle is now in play."

"He is a good man," Bandar said. "He deserves better."

"Deserts do not come into it," said a fanged and hulking nightmare. "It is about survival."

"Whose?"

A woman with impossibly long legs, an unnaturally buoyant bosom, and a husky contralto said, "Yours. Your uncle's. Everyone's."

"Even yours?"

"Even ours," said a rosy-countenanced infant. "It is your destiny to help. Accept it."

"But I am not a Helper. My conformation has the Seeker dominant, influenced by the Wise Man and the Solitary, shadowed by the Hoarder." He referred to the archetypes that blended together to form the core elements of his psyche. They had been delineated when he first applied to study at the Institute.

The figure before him made no answer but abruptly disappeared, to be replaced by a rippling rent in the mist. Hating the necessity, Bandar stepped into it.

At first he was aware only of the Landscape: a vast sky of a paler blue than that which covered Old Earth in its penultimate age, the sun yellow and hot, the clouds above the horizon a pristine white. The land itself was mostly flat, with here and there a gentle roll. A constant wind stirred its covering of dry grass and scrub. In the far distance Bandar could see immense tables of rock, level on top and formed from striated layers of age-hardened sediments, some attended by solitary spires of stone shaped by no hand but the weather's.

He knew that it would be more than just a place. The Multifacet would have dropped him into at least a Situation, perhaps a complex Event, and he and Uncle Fley would be players in it. He had sought a lucid dream, in which his noönaut training would have given him considerable power to mold his environment. But this setting had all the hallmarks of an established Location somewhere in the matrix that was the Commons. Experimentally, he summoned his skills and attempted to still the wind. It blew on without regard for his efforts.

Next he tested his voice. The single tone rang clear in the fresh air, though it was more of a tenor than Bandar's own baritone. *At least this time they have not muted me*, he thought. *If I wish, I can summon an emergency gate and awaken in my bed.*

But he wouldn't. Somewhere in this Location was his innocent uncle, threatened by evil forces and with only his nephew Guth to help him withstand them. *I must discover the dynamics of this Location, work out the direction of events, then resolve them in our favor.*

It was a flagrant violation of all that a noönaut stood for. Explorers of the Commons observed while unobserved, insulated from the perceptions of the idiomatic entities by the thrans that they constantly sang. It was

dangerous to interfere with the workings of Events or Situations: the idiomatics were not people but bundles of simplified traits and habitual responses; intervening in a way that distorted their preordained roles brought disharmony, generating a psychic friction that rapidly built up energies that discharged violently.

He gave the environment one more searching look and, seeing nothing amiss, examined himself. Once again, he had been deposited into the virtual flesh of an idiomatic. Looking down, he saw a checked shirt and a wide belt with a heavy buckle. Below that were tan trousers of some sturdy material with pockets riveted at the corners, into which the thumbs of sun-browned and work-hardened hands were tucked. From the turned up cuffs of the pants emerged a pair of worn boots with pointed toes.

He became aware of the idiomatic's thoughts: simple satisfaction at being out on his own, trusted with some minor but serious task. *That is different*, Bandar thought.

When the Multifacet had dropped him into the Event known as The Rising of the Oppressed, the persona of the idiomatic into which he had been placed had been completely expunged. This time, Bandar seemed to be an addition to a persona that came equipped with its own inner life. That raised the question of whether the noönaut had control over his host's actions. He doubted that he would be a mere passenger, but suppressing the idiomatic's will entirely might cause disharmony. To test his influence, Bandar gently urged a turn to the right. The idiomatic shifted his weight and gazed idly in the suggested direction.

Bandar next tried a nose scratching and was rewarded with success. It seemed that he had only to think about his host's taking an action and it would happen — so long as it was within the idiomatic's repertoire. Willing an idiomatic entity to do something far out of character would render it disharmonious, and the noönaut did not wish to be trapped in the flesh of an idiomatic on a rampage.

It was time to seek out Uncle Fley and do whatever the Multifacet wanted done. *Let's go*, he thought, and the idiomatic turned around, giving Bandar a view of a large, long-legged beast to which was strapped a contraption of leather and metal. Bandar had seen such beasts in many Locations that dated from the dawn-time, when they were ridden or used

to pull primitive wheeled vehicles. Clearly this variant of whatever Situation he had been thrust into was from far back in the Deep Past, before the discovery of inherent motilation or even submolecular circuitry. Now as he looked at the beast, the word "horse" came into his mind, and even as he thought it, he realized that the idiomat was placing one foot into a metal loop hung from a leather strap. A moment later, Bandar was surveying the scene from a higher vantage point. He eased back on his control of his host so that it could go about its business. Bandar would watch and learn until it became clear what he was expected to do.

His host tugged on the leather straps — the word "reins" popped into Bandar's vocabulary as he focused on the items — and the animal's head veered to the right. The rest of its body followed as the idiomat's boot heels thumped into its ribs. They set off at a "canter" across the Landscape, the wind of their passage tugging at a broad-brimmed hat that Bandar found he was wearing. He contented himself with observing and over the next few minutes felt his vocabulary filling up with the jargon of this Location.

Not far off, he came to what he realized was the idiomat's intended destination — a patch of prairie not much different from any other, except that it featured a wire fence whose barbed strands had been severed, creating a wide gap, and a muddle of tracks made by a herd of animals with split hooves. The idiomat's eyes followed the tracks. They led up a gentle slope and he kicked his horse after them, coming to a broad crest from which the land fell away into a wide depression. In the middle distance moved a cloud of dust in which Bandar could see idiomats on beasts like his, slapping rope "lariats" against saddles and hooting as they drove forty or fifty "cattle" before them.

The idiomat's heels hit the horse's side again and he shouted some wordless syllable that obviously had meaning to the horse, because the beast broke into a sudden gallop. Bandar marveled at the smooth ease with which his host sat his saddle as the animal sped down into the basin, its ears flattened and its long neck hair — "mane" — streaming back over the hands that held the reins.

Man and beast rapidly closed the distance to catch up with the herd. They swung wide to race past the dust, then cut in ahead of the herd, the

idiomat rearing his horse onto its hind legs, shouting hoarsely and waving his hat. The oncoming cattle shied and milled about, making sounds of distress.

Out of the dust came three men on horseback, dressed roughly in the same fashion as Bandar's host, though something about them gave the impression that they were of a different sort. *Henchmen*, the noñaut decided. Then he listened as his host spoke.

"Those are our cattle!"

*He's younger than I thought*, Bandar decided, *angry, but also frightened*.

One of the men urged his mount closer. In one hand was a long barreled weapon — "rifle" — laid casually over his saddle. Using only his knees, the Henchman skillfully directed his horse to turn broadside to Bandar's idiomat, and now the rifle's dark orifice was pointing Bandar's way. A cruel smile formed on the tanned and stubbled face and the man said, "Can't be yours, kid. They're on Circle B land."

"You cut our fence, drove them off," said Bandar's host, and hearing the high-pitched voice again confirmed his first impression: he was in the body of an idiomat on the cusp between boy and man.

"Now that ain't a nice thing to say," said the man with the rifle. The dust was blowing away and Bandar saw two more riders moving out to either side of the confrontation, both armed, both handling their weapons with a casual familiarity that argued that there would be no hesitation in using them.

"You say things like that," said the one with the rifle, who looked to be a Chief Henchman, "you better be ready to back 'em up. Man don't have to take that kind of talk, specially from some wet-nosed kid."

Bandar was worried by the anger that was now clouding what there was of the idiomat's mind. If the boy made the wrong move in this confrontation the man with the rifle might well fire. The noñaut was reasonably sure that his host would turn out to be the Helper in this Situation, his death therefore highly unlikely this early in the dynamic. But it would not help if he had to solve the puzzle while physically incapacitated. Besides, he did not know what pain felt like to an idiomat and did not care to find out through experimentation. He exerted his will to keep the boy's hands on the reins.

But he didn't take control of the idiomat's mouth. "You won't get away with this," the boy said. "My pa'll kill you."

The other two henchmen had moved closer. One of them, a skinny man with a thin mustache, sneered and spat a stream of brown liquid, while the other, heavysset with a week's stubble on his jaw, said, "Sure, kid. We're scared to death."

The one with the rifle said, "Tell your old man if he's got anythin' to say, he knows where to find Mr. Strayhorn. He'll be waitin'."

Bandar could see where this narrative was heading. It was a Situation, probably a variation on the motif of Resisting the Despot. This Strayhorn would be a Principal in this Location, a local Tyrant imposing his will upon a Suffering Population that was too timid to revolt and overthrow him. His host's father was probably also a Principal, the Hero of this tale, and the sequence of events would climax in a confrontation between the two, from which only one would emerge alive.

Which of the two that would be was uncertain: Heroes came in a wide variety of types, and Bandar would need to take a close look at the father before he could establish whether the idiomat was of the Reluctant, or the Pure, or even the Sacrificial type. He doubted that this Situation would include an Accidental or an Unlikely Hero, and was already confident that he would not find a cynical Antihero when they returned to wherever the boy had come from.

In any case, Bandar was clearly once again cast as the Helper, and he wondered at the Multifacet's purpose in enlisting him to play the same role he had played in *The Rising of the Oppressed*. Of course, repetition of themes was a commonplace of the Commons, he thought, so it should not come as a surprise that, having become conscious, the noosphere should demonstrate a tendency toward the redundant.

Now was not a good time to mull these matters, Bandar knew. Fley was not in any of the Henchmen so it was time to move on. He exerted more control over the youth, causing him to pull the horse's head in the direction from which they had come and energetically ride away. As they went, Bandar paid attention to the setting, noting that the grass and scrub seemed well realized. The horse and its equipment also exhibited a wealth of detail, enough that Bandar felt comfortable in classifying this Location as a Class Two Situation, scoring high on the Realism scale. That meant



that if, for example, his idiomat fell from his mount at their present rate of speed, he could expect broken bones, possibly internal injuries, and even death if he landed the wrong way.

The idiomat was determined to get home and report the theft of the cattle. Bandar was sure that would be the Initiating Incident of this Situation. He would know the Hero's type once he saw how the news was received; that would give him a reasonably good idea of where all this was heading, and some sense of where to look for Fley. He let the boy guide the horse through the broken fence and across the rolling landscape until they came to a small valley bisected by a shallow river. Down below was a house made of logs, a couple of outbuildings and an enclosure — "corral" — of posts and rails surrounding three more horses.

The boy set the horse to angle down the slope and Bandar left them to their business while he surveyed the scene. The level of detail intensified here, supporting his belief that this was the seat of a Principal. When in response to the boy's cries of, "Pa! Pa!" as they splashed through the river, a man came out onto the house's open porch, the noñnaut's expectation was confirmed: Pa was a fully detailed Class One idiomatic entity, tall and muscular, with lines of character etched into the planes of his face and subtlety in his light-colored eyes. The work clothes he wore had the same lived-in look as the boy's attire.

Bandar only half listened to the exchange between the two as the boy leapt from the saddle and breathlessly told his parent about the Initiating Incident. He was looking for telltales that would define this Hero. He had already added Flawed to the list of rejected types, and judging by the worry that he saw in the older idiomat's eyes as the boy told of confronting the three Henchmen, he was also ready to dismiss Pure as an option — a Pure Hero's eyes would have blazed with righteous anger. This one looked more tired than angry.

The boy was looking directly at the older idiomat as he spoke his lines and Bandar was taking advantage of the point of view to study the Principal. As he allowed the impression to intensify, using a mentalism that was part of any trained noñnaut's tool-kit, something tugged at the edge of his mind. He sensed something familiar about Pa, something in the face that underlay the features and formed the essence of the idiomat's character.

The boy had finished his story. The Principal's brows drew down and his eyes lost their focus as he looked inward at some memory. *Reluctant Hero*, Bandar told himself, *not for certain, but definitely most likely*. Then, as the father stroked his nose with a thoughtful finger, the "something familiar" leaped at Bandar and seized his full attention.

"Uncle Fley!" His cry sounded strange as he heard it in the still unsettled voice of the youth. The Principal acted as any Class One idiomat should at being confronted with disharmonious information. He paused, startled, then like an actor when a fellow cast member speaks a line out of sequence, he ignored the interruption and went on with the scene.

His face regained a mood of introspection. The boy, who had been equally startled at what had come from his own mouth, also returned to the flow of the Situation. "What are we going to do, Pa?" he said.

The Principal crossed to a water barrel and dipped up a mouthful, his eyes squinting into the westering sun as he drank. "I need to think about that, Mark," he said.

*And I need to think about what's going on here*, Guth Bandar thought to himself. Because when he had glimpsed the resemblance to his uncle in the Principal's expression and blurted out his relative's name, he had seen more than a jolt of surprise appear in the older idiomat's eyes. For a moment, the face that had looked back at Bandar was deeply familiar. Just as Bandar had been inserted into the Helper's virtual flesh, his Uncle Fley was trapped within the Hero's.

**REPETITION IS REALITY** was one of the maxims drummed into undergraduates' minds in their first years at the Institute. By definition, nothing that happened in the Commons happened only once. The constantly recycling Events and Situations were distillations of events and situations in the waking world that had happened so many times, in all their varieties and permutations, that their essences had become part of humanity's psychic machinery. Anything that had occurred no more than once or twice was not retained.

Bandar considered this hoary truth as he struggled to maintain his composure. The worst mistake he could make was to let himself be caught up in the drama of the situation. If he allowed himself to be consumed by

worry for his uncle, he would be drawn more deeply into the dynamics of this Situation. He might become lost in its movements, and thus unable to help Fley.

*Repetition*, he repeated. *It's not only how the Commons works, but how it teaches.* The Multifacet wanted him to learn something, and this was its method of instruction. The last time it had plunged him into a Situation he had been made the mute Helper to a Hero he had scarcely had time to know before events moved rapidly to the crisis. Now he was cast in the same role, but the intensity had been raised by the infusion into the Hero's persona of someone he cared for deeply.

*Raise the stakes* was another rule in the Commons: these kinds of Events and Situations always proceeded on an upward gradient of tension and conflict, culminating in a cathartic climax and an emotion-drenched denouement. The oxymoron that was the conscious unconscious was working to its own inbuilt rules, as if it were itself governed by unconscious drives. For a moment Bandar stopped to consider that the phenomenon of a conscious unconsciousness's unconscious would make a truly interesting paper, then decided now was surely not the time.

*Very well*, he told himself, *there is no way out but to see this through to the end.* He would play out the dynamic of the Situation, abiding by the rules. Uncle Fley ought to take no hurt from being attached to a Reluctant Hero. Unused to the ways of the Commons, he would tell Bandar in the morning about a particularly vivid dream — if any memory of these events even clung to his waking mind.

While Bandar had been thinking, events had moved on in the Situation. The father was now carrying a rifle similar to the one the Henchman had pointed at the boy. He had led a horse from the corral and was tightening the broad leather strap — “girth” — that looped under its belly. He slipped the weapon into a scabbard attached to the saddle, then swung up onto the horse. The boy did likewise with his own mount. They wheeled the animals and rode toward the horizon. Moments later, in the way that time often compressed in the Commons, they were out on the prairie and within sight of a cluster of wooden buildings that soon resolved into a rough and ready settlement.

Riding into town, Bandar took a look through the idiomat's eyes and

judged that little of import to the Situation would happen here. The idiomats walking the wooden sidewalks or crossing the single unpaved street lacked intensity. Most of the buildings were of the Essential/Representational type, with far less detail than the dwelling where he had encountered Pa. Only the ones with signs that read "General Store," "Sheriff," and "Saloon" looked to be fully realized. The two idiomats pulled their mounts to a halt outside the first, where a man attired in clothes similar to the Hero's, but with only a Sincere/Approximate level of detail, was asleep on a tilted-back wooden chair, his booted ankles crossed on a railing and a broad-brimmed hat over his eyes. A five-pointed metal star was pinned to his chest.

"Mooney, where's the sheriff?" said the Principal.

The man did not move, not even to raise his hat. "This time of day, I expect he'll be over in the Nugget," he said.

The Hero and Helper turned their mounts and walked them over to the other Earnest/Realistic building. They both stepped down from the saddle then up onto the wooden porch of the saloon, but the Principal said, "Mark, you wait outside."

"But Pa — " Bandar's idiomat began, only to have his protest cut off.

"I said wait."

The Hero lifted his weapon from its scabbard and went into the building, pushing through a pair of swinging half-doors made of slatted wood. The boy obeyed but positioned himself close to the entrance so that he could see and hear what went on within.

Bandar gave the conversation between the Hero and the sheriff only a portion of his attention. This would be part of the process by which the Reluctant Hero is isolated from all hope of help and comes to know that, like it or not, he must solve his problem through his own efforts. There might be one or even two other potential supporters who would be appealed to in vain, then the Hero would resign himself to the necessity of a confrontation with the opposing Principal, Strayhorn. Bandar sketched out in his mind the likely sequence of events, half listening as he heard the elderly sheriff explaining, in a tone tinged with disgust, that anything outside the town limits was beyond his jurisdiction.

Soon the Hero would come out of the saloon and get on with it. Probably he would ride out to Strayhorn's center of power for the

Confrontation Minor that, far from resolving the conflict, would instead intensify it. The Hero would be abused and something beyond him would be threatened — perhaps the boy or maybe a female Loved One who, if she was to play a role in the dynamic, ought to be factored into the Situation just about now. Bandar had the boy look around for a female idiomat. He was fairly sure that the tavern would not be the place to find her and so cast his eye back to the street outside.

A high-pitched, oscillating whine impinged upon his concentration and caused him to look up. A circular shape had appeared in the air above the dusty street. Bandar's initial impression of the object was colored by his having to perceive it through the idiomat boy's sensorium, so he first took it for a hat or a pie plate that someone had flung into the air. Then, as the thing descended Bandar realized that it was not a small object at a low height, but was instead something immense that was plummeting swiftly toward the town from the upper reaches of the Location's sky.

*That can't be right*, the noñaut thought. As a Situation, Resisting the Despot could play itself out against a background in which the cruel Tyrant was the head of an invading species from another world, but in such a Location the tyranny would have been established before the Situation began its cycle. Besides, the Initiating Incident would be completely different from the theft of cattle that had sparked the dynamic in which Bandar and Fley were trapped.

The object had by now come down to hover above the town, revealing itself to be a gigantic disc of dull gray metal. Around its rim a string of flashing lights chased themselves at high speed. As Bandar watched, four tapering and telescoping legs extended themselves from its ventral hub. One struck hard into the earth of the street, while the others plunged straight down through the roofs of the Essential/Representational buildings, with a crash of splintering wood and shattering glass. A rectangular hatch opened in the belly of what Bandar now recognized must be a fully realized assault ship from an entirely different Location, probably a variant of The Incursion of the Other, Class Two or Three.

*It's a straddle*, he thought. *I'm actually seeing a straddle*. Straddles were Locations that, according to some theories, had come into existence far back in the development of the collective unconscious, when new variants on archetypical events and situations were still being created by

a combination of human ingenuity and the unfolding of actual events in the waking world. Elements from two substantially different but superficially similar Locations would temporarily cohere in an Event or Situation that straddled both. But their internal dynamics would quickly pull them apart.

As he pursued this line of introspection, a segmented ramp extruded from the oblong hatch. Even before it touched the ground the opening filled with armored and multi-limbed creatures that would have stood about waist high to Bandar's idiomat. But these invaders were clearly motivated to do more running than standing; they swarmed down the ramp, each skittering on some of its limbs while others discharged energy weapons at any target they spotted with their stalked eyes.

A yellow hound had been sleeping in the shade of a slab-sided wagon. Now it rose up and issued a tentative bark, then began a mournful howl—probably its only response to any stimulus, Bandar thought. A coruscating bolt of energy *whuzzed* through the air, catching the dog in mid ululation and causing the animal to glow brightly for a moment, then vanish, leaving a shadowy smudge on the ground.

The invaders were firing indiscriminately. Bandar saw Mooney, the man who had been sleeping beneath a hat, stir himself. His booted heels hit the wooden sidewalk. He stood up shakily, but the hat still adhered to his brow, and Bandar surmised that the idiomat probably had no face beneath, none being needed for the minor role he was meant to play. Now his virtual existence came to an incandescent end as one of the metal-clad spiders scuttled down onto the street and opened fire.

Another leaped from the ramp onto the second-story balcony of a building whose front bore the legend "Rosie's Club for Gentlemen" and aimed its weapon down and across the street at a well-realized female idiomat, mature though still youthful and dressed in high-necked blouse and full skirt topped by a gray gingham apron, who had just come out of the General Store. *The Hero's Loved One, I'd wager*, Bandar thought, a moment before the invader's blast incinerated her.

The boy in which he was housed had reacted much as Bandar had: he stared, open-mouthed, at a spectacle of violence all the more horrific for being completely unexpected. Now it struck home to the noönaut that the straddle must soon throw the idiomat into disharmony, putting his

behavior well beyond Bandar's influence. Along with that realization came a belated awareness that he was not viewing these events from a noñnaut's normal vantage — hidden from the invaders' view by the power of a chanted thran — but from deep within the frame of the action. And the next bolt of energy might be directed his way.

As that thought came, the horse he had ridden in on lit up like a sunburst then dimmed to leave a smudged horse-shadow on the saloon porch. The Hero's mount had just enough time to rear up in terror before it received the same illumination. Careful to keep his actions within his host's range of acceptable reactions, Bandar now took control and pushed through the saloon's swinging doors, ducking low as he did so.

The Principal and the sheriff were still going through their dynamic, unaware that, out in the street, their Situation had been so convincingly straddled. Bandar crossed the sawdust-strewn floor to where the Hero stood frustrated above the sheriff, who shook his gray-haired head in shame and chagrin. Pa's face hardened with anger as he swung toward Bandar and said, "I told you to stay outside, boy!"

*I must be careful*, Bandar told himself. *This could fly off in every direction*. He could not announce that spiders with incomprehensible weaponry were incinerating the town. Instead he willed the young idiomat to call out a danger that would fit within the Situation's paradigm, then let the boy control his own vocal apparatus.

"Apaches!" the Helper cried. "They're killing everyone!"

Screams and random shouts now came from outside, along with the repeated *whuzz* of energy weapons. The invaders were indeed killing everything that moved in the street, and would soon enter the buildings to continue their work. The sheriff now stood up and moved toward the noise, confusion clouding his face. A stocky man with pomaded hair and gaitered sleeves who had been polishing a glass behind a long wooden counter set it down and came out from behind the barrier to peer over the top of the doors. A moment later, the top quarter of him incandesced and evaporated, the rest of him tumbling to the floor.

A second bolt entered through the door and cremated the sheriff. The Hero blinked, looked with puzzlement at the smear on the floor, then recovered enough to turn toward the portal. He worked a lever on the underside of his weapon, the clicking of the mechanism sounding a note

of resolution. In a moment, Bandar knew, Pa would reluctantly advance to do what he could to resolve the situation, carrying Uncle Fley within him. The noñnaut did not want to see his own relative go the way of the hat-faced man, but he knew that to move a Principal from his proper track he must offer a motive that was within the idiomat's frame of reference.

He took control of the boy to make him lay his hand on the Hero's arm and say, "Pa, I'm scared."

The Principal turned, as Bandar had expected, to deal with his Helper's fear. The noñnaut now followed up with a plausible suggestion. "They're too many to fight. We oughta go warn the others," he said.

He did not know what others he referred to, but was confident that in a Class Two Situation, a Reluctant Hero would surely have "others" to be concerned about. He did not think it wise to mention the fate of the Loved One.

"You're right, Mark," the Hero said. "We'll go out the back and circle around, see what we can do."

They went through a door behind the bar, finding a storeroom with barred windows and a door in its outer wall. The Principal crossed the intervening space and pulled open the door, then paused in the opening to peer outside. He took a half step back, then seemed to freeze. Bandar heard the clatter of many metal-shod feet from the saloon's main room behind him, then the sound of the invaders' weapons. There was no time to delay. He shoved Pa out through the doorway and leapt after him.

He saw immediately why the Principal had hesitated in the doorway: instead of an Essential/Representational back alley, they were confined in a corridor formed by two parallel walls of well-dressed gray stone, Fully Realized. Higher above them than they could reach was a ceiling made of tightly fitted slabs of the same material. The light was dim, provided only by flickering torches ensconced in the walls before and behind them at distant intervals. The chill that came from the floor of packed earth told Bandar they were beneath the Earth. Of the doorway through which they had entered, there was now no sign.

*This is definitely not right*, he thought. He looked to the Principal and saw signs of tension and rising disorientation. Unless Pa could be focused, he would soon fall into disharmony. Bandar had no doubt that the long-barreled weapon was intrinsic to the idiomat's motif of action. If the



dislocated Hero snapped, the weapon would be put to use, and Bandar's host was the only available target.

He cast about for some means of consolidating the idiomat and saw a hopeful sign in the dirt. "Look, Pa," he said, "our cattle must be up ahead."

The Principal looked where Bandar pointed. Clear in the firelit floor of the tunnel, split-hoofed tracks led onward into the darkness. A pile of dung moldered nearby. There seemed to be only one set of prints, and something about their arrangement struck Bandar as odd, but he could not afford to stand around thinking about it. Idiomats were characterized by their actions; to keep an armed Hero from devolving into wholesale violence, he needed to put the Principal to the work he was meant to do.

"Come on, Pa," the noñaut said, setting off in the direction the tracks led.

The Hero paused only a moment before saying, "Wait up, boy." He caught up with Bandar and, eyes flicking between the tracks and the dimness ahead, pushed past him to lead the way. Bandar was content to follow behind. It gave him time to think.

They had entered an entirely different Location, and the noñaut had a strong hunch about what lay at the heart of all this darkness. It would be The Baiting of the Monster in Its Lair, and a very old version of the ancient trope, judging by the primitive setting and the type of ogreish being that was indicated by the tracks and dung.

*But it can't be a straddle*, Bandar reasoned. Scholars had argued that two Locations might temporarily cohere, but three was beyond all speculation. He wished he could deploy his globular map of the Commons. It would confirm his suspicions if he peered into the color-coded globe and found no flashing indicator to specify his location. But he could not display such an out-of-context object in the presence of the Hero or the Helper without pushing the idiomatic entities toward disharmony.

*I need no external confirmation*, Bandar told himself. *I came into this through a dream, and even if events are being manipulated by the Multifacet, there is only one venue where all of this can be happening — in my own head, my personal unconscious.* It worried him, though, that the powers he should have commanded in a lucid dream were somehow being blocked. Then an even more worrisome thought intruded: the

Commons could manipulate his dreams — the noosphere was where dreams came from, after all — but how could Uncle Fley have been transported into Bandar's personal unconscious? He did not believe his sensing of Fley's presence in the Principal, however passive that presence might be, was an illusion; an experienced noönaut was equipped to tell real from false. But these events meant that some of the most time-honored rules of how the Commons functioned could be radically overturned. For a moment Bandar imagined trying to make that case to the Grand Colloquium, then broke off the reverie to concentrate on his immediate problem.

The tunnel ended at a Y-junction. Bandar saw tracks leading in both directions, but those that went into the left-hand tunnel looked fresher. "This way, Pa," he said. The Principal's chiseled features still wore a look of underlying apprehension, but he nodded and said, "Stay close to me, Mark," and followed the trail.

Soon after the Y-junction they came to a wide circular chamber from which six other passageways led. Tracks littered the dirt floor, but the Principal now had his well-developed faculties focused on following the freshest trail, and he quickly chose an exit and led Bandar on. They moved at a brisk walk, the young idiomat's shorter legs striving to keep pace, turning here to the left and there to the right, occasionally climbing or descending ramps of fitted stone slabs.

They stopped at a T-intersection, the Hero's nostrils flaring as he looked from one side to the other. "I can smell 'em," he said, gesturing with his prominent chin to the right. He eased back the hammer on the rifle until it gave a faint click and crept forward.

Bandar was familiar with the motif of The Baiting of the Monster in Its Lair. The encounter of the Hero and the Monster represented the archetypical struggle for dominance between the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. Usually, the Hero was physically out-classed, but still managed to triumph over the stronger opponent through guile or preknowledge of some inherent weakness in the enemy. Pa could not know what he was about to face, but his weapon, being out of place in this milieu, might affect the outcome.

An odor similar to that which had wafted off the stolen cattle grew ranker as they made their way down the tunnel. Ahead was an archway

limned in brighter torchlight than shone behind them, a chill breeze carrying the beast-smell to them. The Hero inched his way to the opening and eased down onto one knee before peering into the open space beyond. Bandar crept close behind and looked over the idiomat's shoulder.

*We have returned to the original Location*, was Bandar's first thought. Beyond the tunnel lay a stretch of twilit prairie, short grass sweeping down a slope into a broad valley. Not far from the base of the slope sprawled a massive house made of squared logs above a fieldstone foundation, with a porch shaded by a shingle roof running along its wide front. Bandar saw a barn and smithy, some low-built structures — "bunkhouses" — and a spacious corral in which stood Pa's stolen cattle.

The Principal's eyes narrowed to slits. "Stay here, Mark," he said.

Bandar could not allow the Hero to carry Fley into whatever waited down there. The idiomat had seen only what he needed to see and had ignored the anomalies that surrounded the scene: that the sky's darkness was too deep to be an effect of clouds or even night, that beyond the big house and to either side the prairie disappeared into thickening shadow, that no wind stirred the grass nor did even a Sincere/Approximate bird or beast ornament the view.

They had not returned to Resisting the Despot. They were not in any true Location of the Commons, and there was no guarantee that the Situation would play itself out by the rules. Bandar urged the boy to defy his father. "No, Pa. You'll need help with the cattle."

The Principal looked thoughtful for a moment then said, "All right, but you stay behind me. And if anything happens, you hit the ground." He checked his weapon again and, holding it loosely in one hand, set off down the slope.

The air remained unnaturally still and the silence was immense. Not even the cattle stirred in their enclosure. The darkness that surrounded the visible elements of the scene seemed to move in as they neared the house and when Bandar looked back he saw blank nothingness crowding their heels.

As they entered the wide dusty yard his eye caught motion in the shadows beneath the porch. From a wide-open door filled with a stygian blackness the three Henchmen emerged into the twilight, their hands resting on the butts of their holstered weapons. Their postures argued for

their being in synch with the normal dynamics of the Situation, but when Bandar examined their expressions he did not see the mocking sneers that should have animated their features at this point in their cycle. A sharp tic drew up one corner of the Chief Henchman's mouth, and the heavysset one displayed a slack jaw and unfocused eyes, while the thin one with the mustache alternated between flashes of stark terror punctuated by an idiot grin.

The Hero noticed none of this, of course, being intent on fulfilling his role in the conflict. When Heroes neared the cusp of a Situation's essential action, they tended to drive forward with increasing momentum, encompassing outrageous violence and destruction as if they were the stuff of day-to-day life.

"I've come for my cattle," Pa was telling the men on the porch.

The Chief Henchman was shaking now, the tic wildly distorting his features, his bootheels beating a rapid staccato rhythm on the boards as his relatively simple faculties cracked under the strain of the anomalies. *He's supposed to defy the Hero*, Bandar thought, *but he's becoming disharmonious*. The other two should have backed up their chief, but without his lead they were falling even faster into disharmony: the chunky one toppled backward onto the porch's wooden floor, shouting wordless sounds, his arms and legs kicking in convulsive spasms, while his mustached compadre turned weeping toward the stone wall, striking it over and over with his bony fists until flesh and blood flew.

The Hero was disregarding the breakdown of the Henchmen, and Bandar sensed that this was the point, in the normal dynamic of the Location, when the Principal Antagonist would be summoned to the Final Confrontation. His supposition was confirmed when Pa stepped onto the porch and shouted into the black hole of the front door, "Strayhorn! Come out here! Or I'm coming in!"

A cold wind, freighted with the rank stench that had hung in the air of the tunnels, gusted from the doorway. The Hero held his rifle at hip height, its muzzle aimed into the darkness. Bandar saw his square jaw twitch and his shoulders set themselves.

"Wait!" Bandar stepped onto the porch and took hold of the idiomat's arm. "Don't go in there."

"It's all right, son," said the Hero. "You wait here."

"No!" Bandar held on. "Uncle Fley! Don't go in!"

The Hero's stern face blinked. And then Fley was bemusedly looking out through the pale eyes. "It's all right, Guth" — now the voice was unmistakably Bandar's uncle's — "it's only a dream."

"No, it's...." The noönaut broke off as a golden glow filled the doorway. A mist wafted toward him and from within it appeared the shifting form of the Multifacet.

"You must not interfere with the essential dynamic," said an apple-cheeked old woman.

"He will be harmed."

"He is the Hero, you the Helper. He will do as he must, you as you must."

"No, we are real. Not like them." Bandar indicated the Henchmen, who now stood or lay inert, all movement having ceased when the Multifacet appeared. "We do not recycle and begin anew."

"We see no difference," said a dog with eyes as large as dinner plates. "You come, you go, only your stories endure."

"No," Bandar said. "I will not do it."

"If you help him, he may survive," said a hulking creature made of animated stone. "If you do not, he surely will not."

"This is not fair."

A young man with checked trousers and red hair answered him with a shrug.

"Nor is it according to the rules."

He was answered by a gentle-faced deity who wept crystal tears. "You must learn or die. Accept it. And now it comes."

The glow faded and with it the tear-stained face. Bandar saw that Fley had slipped back behind the Hero's eyes and determination reclaimed its place in the Principal's face. Pa turned again to the doorway.

Bandar thought fast. "No, Pa," he said. "He'll jump you in the darkness. Make him come out."

The Principal checked himself. The Hero was always disposed to accept aid from the Helper. "You're right, son," he said. He stepped back, his weapon covering the doorway, and Bandar backed with him into the yard. A silence settled on them, but it was soon broken by a crashing of footsteps from within the house, the sound of hard, sharp hooves on a

plank floor. The stench reached an overpowering intensity; then the doorway filled with a creature too tall and too wide to fit easily through it: an amalgam of man and bull, spewing foam from its muzzle, shaking its needle-pointed horns, pawing with hooved hind feet at the doorstep while its outsized hands reflexively grasped at the air.

The thing roared, revealing teeth that were neither human nor bovine, but daggers meant to tear flesh. It ducked its head to clear the lintel, lowered one shoulder to squeeze through the doorway, then stepped clear onto the porch.

The Hero fired his weapon without raising it from his hip, leveraging its action with speed and precision. A tight grouping of holes appeared in the center of the beast-headed thing's leathery chest and the impact of the projectiles drove it back against the sides of the doorway. But it did not fall. It brushed at the wounds with black-nailed fingers, bared its pointed teeth, and roared again. Then it crossed the porch in two clattering strides and stepped down into the yard, its great hands reaching for Pa.

"Run!" Bandar shouted, but the Hero was now beyond his reach, locked into the Final Confrontation even though this version could not be anything like the Situation this Principal was intended for. As the beast-man reached for him, the Hero dropped his weapon and leaped forward to seize its horns. He anchored his heels in the dust then rotated his body and pulled sideways and down as if to throw the roaring creature over his hip.

But the impulses Pa could draw upon were out of synch with this struggle. The beast-man swept one brawny arm in an arc that caught the Hero across the midriff, folding him up and breaking his grip, lifting him from the ground and throwing him across the yard. He landed hard, the breath whooshing out of him. The brute watched as he struggled to rise, but instead of charging and finishing the attack, it swung its monstrous head toward Bandar.

Its eyes were an expressionless black, unrimmed by white or iris, without intelligence or self-awareness, full only of a mindless intent to do harm. Bandar had seen the creature's like before, though always while chanting a thran that kept him from being noticed. Now he felt the full impact of archetypal malevolence directed at his own being, and he gasped as if struck by a blast of icy water.

From the corner of his eye he saw the Hero trying to rise and return

to the fight. That was, after all, what Heroes did, however unequal the combat. *And help is what the Helper does*, he thought, *though how can I help against this?*

The bull-man pawed the dust, its baleful glare still locked on the noönaut. Then the intensity of its gaze diminished and, for a moment, another persona inspected Bandar through its black orbs, with a gaze full of cruel and disdainful amusement.

*Gabbris!* Even in the face of a beast-thing, the sneer of Didrick Gabbris was unmistakable. *But it cannot be!* The thought flashed through Bandar's mind. Dreamers could meet while passing through the outer arrondissement of the Commons, though it took exceptional powers of noönaut technique for them to do so. But actual dreams took place in an individual's own unconscious, and no other person could share that psychic space. The barriers were impermeable.

And yet.... Here was Uncle Fley inserted into a dream of Bandar's, and now Didrick Gabbris had undoubtedly appeared — not a dream-imagining by Bandar, but the actual entity that was his enemy's own psyche.

Which was impossible. Which violated all of the rules discovered and delineated over the millennia by countless explorers of the Commons, so many of whom had given their lives as the price of hard-won knowledge. And now, as the monster turned its gaze back toward the Hero who had risen to one knee, a hand to his diaphragm as he struggled to control his disrupted breathing, Bandar knew what this mad business was all about.

*You must learn*, the Multifacet had said. He was being taught an unprecedented lesson, but the learning was being delivered in the indirect manner by which the noösphere always transmitted its wisdom.

"I understand," he said aloud. "You are showing me that rules I have always been taught are sacrosanct now no longer apply. Very well, I accept the lesson. I will be the Helper, and willingly. But now you must help me."

He saw no golden glow, no swirling mist or protean figure, but he knew he had been heard. Now he would see if his terms had been accepted.

He focused upon the setting. *I dream a lucid dream*, he thought, putting behind the assertion all the strength of will available to a mature noönaut. *The dream is mine. All here is mine. I take control.*

The beast-man's hind legs, human from hip through thigh, bovine from knee to hoof, quivered as it crouched and set itself to leap upon the

Hero. Bandar closed the fingers of one hand as if turning the appendage into a cutting blade, then swept his arm down in a chopping gesture. As the edge of his hand clove the air, the ground beneath it trembled, then split open. A crack raced zigzag across the yard, dividing the monster from Bandar and the Hero. Now the noönaut flung wide his arms and the Earth groaned and snapped as the crevice gaped and deepened.

The beast-man roared its rage, its hooves stamping the ground. It gnashed murderous teeth and glared at Bandar with a primal hatred in which he could still see the spiteful malice of Didrick Gabbris. Then it raced forward and flung itself headlong across the still widening gap.

For a long moment it seemed to float motionless in the air, then its chest crashed into the lip of the ruptured ground, and its huge hands clawed at the dust while its dangling hoofed feet scratched and scrabbled for purchase.

Bandar watched with satisfaction. *It will not succeed*, he thought. The thing was losing its struggle and would slip inevitably into the chasm. He saw panic appear in the fathomless depths of its eyes that still contained Gabbris. "We have beaten you," Bandar told him.

Then he saw its eyes look beyond him, saw triumph flare in their blackness. Bandar turned, a shout of "No!" forming in his mouth. But he was too late. The Principal moved past him on shaky but determined legs and raised a foot to plant one boot heel square between the horns of the enemy.

The great head snapped back and the creature lost all hope of climbing out of the riven earth. But as it slid backward into the abyss it reached and seized. Its giant fingers encircled Pa's calf and pulled him over the edge.

Bandar flung himself down, his head and shoulders over the lip of the precipice. Below him he could see the two of them falling slowly into the bottomless darkness, the monster's grip unyielding on the Hero. There was no time to control the event. Pa looked up and Bandar could see his uncle staring at him in true fear from behind Principal's widened eyes.

"Fley!" the noönaut shouted. "Wake up, Fley! It's only a dream! Wake up!"

And then they were gone.

This time, the Multifacet left Guth Bandar with a full memory of his experiences. Thus it was with both urgency and trepidation that, the



following morning, the young man climbed the angled stairway that led to the apartment above the housewares store. He passed through the silent lounge and entered the hallway that led to the master sleeping chamber. No sound came from behind the closed door.


He engaged the device that caused the panel to open and poked his head around the jamb. His uncle lay facedown on the sleeping pallet. Bandar listened but heard no breathing. He wished he could go back downstairs and avoid this moment, but instead he summoned up his noōnautic discipline and crossed the room. He put his hand on Fley's shoulder and gently shook.

A sharp intake of breath told Bandar that the man still lived. But death, though not impossible, was not the outcome he feared. "Uncle," he said, "time to awaken."

The older man made incoherent sounds, and Bandar's heart fell within him. "Uncle," he said again and pulled at the thin shoulder to roll the man over. Fley came easily and a moment later was sprawled on his back, mouth slack and eyes staring without focus.

*Oh, no,* Bandar said within the confines of his skull. *He has not come back.*

Then the man on the bed blinked and smacked his lips, and the eyes that regarded Bandar filled with intelligence and affection. "Guth," he said, "I had the strangest dream."

 FEW DAYS later, Bandar passed by Barr-Chevry's and cast a knowing eye over its outer display. The goods offered looked no different from those that had been sold in the establishment since time out of mind. Nor were there any signs of the allegedly intended competition with Bandar's Mercantile Emporium.

Bandar stepped inside and when he was approached by the shopkeeper, he inquired as to whether there were any insipitators on the premises.

The fellow seemed somewhat distracted but said, "Odd that you would ask. We were to have dealt in such goods, but instead we are undergoing another change of orientation. All is in limbo until the new ownership is settled in."

"I thought the new owner was operating at a remove."

The man's face expressed fatalism in the face of unavoidable difficulties. "That was the previous new owner," he said. "He is no longer part of the environment."

"I don't understand," said Bandar.

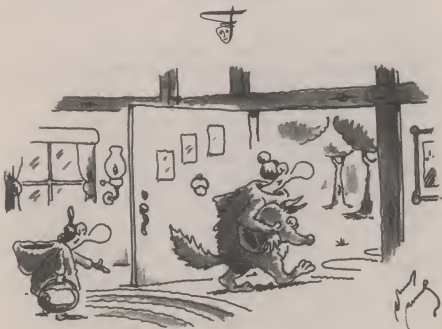
"Nor do I. Apparently he has lost all interest." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Indeed, I have heard he has gone mad."

Bandar expressed surprise, at which the man confided that it should have been expected: the stricken owner, he had heard, was one of those odd fellows who inhabit the Institute for Historical Inquiry. "I believe they're all canted well off the vertical," he said.

"You may be right," said Bandar.

"In any case, when the new owners take charge, they will have no need of me. I've heard that Fley Bandar may require some assistance and will seek employment there."

"I wouldn't bother," Bandar said. "He has all the help he needs."



*"Revenge isn't the answer, Grandma!"*



# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

*Monsters: A Celebration of the Classics from Universal Studios*, Del Rey, 2006, \$29.95.

**W**HEN I was a kid, you couldn't download movies from the Internet. There weren't DVDs. There weren't even VHS tapes. There was no cable. In fact, there were only three channels available on TV. You could see movies on TV, but it was a haphazard affair. You took what you could get, or you went to a theater.

Horror movies weren't the most popular commodity, but you could find them on shows like *Shock Theatre* (a late Friday night film showcase, with that creepy hand coming up out of the quicksand in the opening credits), or as late, *late* night movies. Even more fun was to take in three or four at the drive-in, or spend the night at a dusk-until-dawn marathon at the movie theater.

Now I'm not saying it's better or worse today. The only point I'm trying to make is that seeing a movie back then was more of a special event than it usually is today.

But the feeling of it being an event isn't the only thing that seems to have gotten lost along the way.

Horror movies used to scare the daylight out of a kid. I had nightmares for years after watching *The House of Wax* (though I suppose kids today might have nightmares after the remake, imaging the plastic face of Paris Hilton coming at them from out of the dark, but I digress...). As we got a bit older and, you know, *sophisticated*, we began to look for the seams in costumes and found the dialogue a bit camp, the plots more so. But it was still fun, and even though you might be able to mouth along with the dialogue, you could still get a start (like from the sound of the bus in the original *Cat People*).

Today horror films don't much go for the scare, and I don't watch

them anymore — for all the easy access I have to them. The problem is that, somewhere along the way, they stopped being about the frisson of the unknown, the dread that crawls up your spine, or the sudden shock of a horrific surprise. Instead, they mostly seem to be rather clinical portrayals of gruesome deaths, each one a little more inventive and graphic than the one before it, with a plotline tying together the "money shots" that are about as interesting as the "plots" you'll find in a porn film.

But much as I dislike most of what's being done in contemporary horror film, I still carry a great affection for the classics, especially the old black & white films. So I was delighted with the arrival of *Monsters* in my P.O. box.

It's a loving tribute to the Universal pantheon: Lon Chaney in *Phantom of the Opera*, Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*, Boris Karloff's *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Wolf Man*, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

There are lots of terrific stills from the films, and remembrances by some of the children of the famous actors, as well as essays by Jennifer Beals, John Landis, Rick Baker, and others who write well about what they know well.

These films still stand the test of time. When I was a teenager, they spoke of the passage between life and death. They evoked mystery and awe as they peeled back the shadows to give us a glimpse into the impossible beyond.

And this book will also stand that test. It's a beautiful and affectionate tribute to a more innocent time, when what happened off-screen (and therefore in our imaginations) was a hundred times more frightening than the graphic splatter of blood on a contemporary film screen.

*Spirits That Walk in Shadow*, by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Viking, 2006, \$17.99.

We all know the disorientation of starting at a new school, or the first day on a new job. We're in over our heads, desperate not to screw up, and feel anything but comfortable.

That's certainly the case with Kim Calloway on her first day on campus. But Kim has more problems than most of us might in such a situation. For one thing, she's suffering from a weird, debilitating depression that comes and goes. For another, her new roommate is, to all intents and purposes, a witch, from a long family of the same. This

would be Jaimie Locke (who was first introduced to us in *The Thread That Binds the Bones*, but don't worry; no familiarity with that book is required to enjoy the one presently in hand.)

Then it turns out that Kim's depressions are being forced upon her by a creature called a viri, and before she knows it, her life is filled with Jaimie's magics, the benefits of being befriended by a *presence* (sort of a small household god), and the protection of a whole gaggle of Jaimie's cousins. Oh, yes, and she learns a couple of things that would give anyone a good excuse to be depressed: the viri will probably kill her, and there's nothing that her new friends and benefactors can do to stop it.

Though they certainly mean to try.

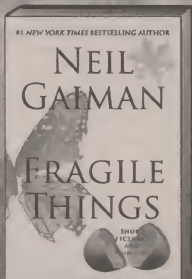
Nina Kiriki Hoffman is one of a small group of writers who, when I get a new book by them, whatever else I'm reading gets put aside so that I can read it first.

*Spirits That Walk in Shadow* was no exception, and didn't disappoint me for a moment.

I love the way Hoffman looks at the world. She has a great insight into character — especially young characters such as the college-aged kids in this book — and one of the

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most inventive minds I've found when it comes to playing around with ideas of magic. Everything in her books always feels fresh.

This time around, she shifts first-person perspectives every chapter. One will be told from Kim's point of view, the next from Jaimie's. What this does is let us see the magical world through Kim's eyes; we get to share her wonder and delight, as well as her fears. But we also get to see the mundane world through Jaimie's eyes, because she's as new to what her family calls the world of Outsiders (non-magical people outside their extended families) as Kim is to magic.

So we get two tales of discovery; two views of the same situation that build upon each other, creating a deeper resonance.

I mentioned earlier that Hoffman does youthful characters well. What I should also mention is that they're presented in such a manner that adults will get as much pleasure and insight from their company as the YA audience to which the book is being marketed.

If you've never read Hoffman before, you are in for such a treat. Start with this book, then go back and read all the rest. You won't be disappointed.

*World's End*, by Mark Chadbourn, Gollancz, 2000, £6.99.

If this was a weekly television series, rather than a book column, it might start off: Previously on *Books To Look For*, we were discussing Mark Chadbourn's *Book of Shadows*, a two-issue comic book mini-series that serves as a prequel to the author's *The Age of Misrule* trilogy. I enjoyed the two issues so much, I mentioned that I was going to track down the prose books to see if Chadbourn could deliver the goods without the benefit of Bo Hampton's artwork.

The quick answer is: yes.

There is a small but growing (I hope!) number of writers who are reclaiming fairyland and the otherworld from what sometimes feels like a never-ending flood of books that treat magic and wonder as no more than weaponry in vast wars between the forces of good and those belonging to some Dark Lord.

Not that there's anything wrong with telling war stories, in using elves and orcs as battalions, or magic as a weapon. After all, such stories offer up high drama, and conflict keeps readers turning pages. But the sense of wonder gets lost, and I miss it.

I know, I know. I go on about this far too much in these pages. But I think what happens is, I'll read the rare book that *does* offer the reminder that an encounter with the otherworld is a moment of awe that changes lives, and I'll realize how much I miss it otherwise.

Chadbourn's writing certainly reminds me. His books brim with characters whose lives change, who are brought to the brink of impossible joy, and equally impossible terror and despair, through their encounters with magic.

In later books, a war could well be brewing, but in this first outing we meet an unlikely group of five humans who are charged with reclaiming the four magical artifacts of Britain. When the artifacts are gathered together in the right place, they can be used to call back the lords of light to combat the forces of darkness that are awakening from one end of Britain to the other — perhaps all over the world. But these lords of light might have their own agendas, and the forces of darkness aren't entirely hell-bent upon the destruction of everything, and —

Well, it's a lot like the way the non-magical world works, actually. Everyone isn't necessarily who or what they seem to be, and while *World's End* ends at a natural place for the reader (and the characters) to take a breath, it's obvious that there's still a lot of story to come.

But what I loved about this book was the first encounters the characters have with the new world order, how they struggle and prevail against the darkness, and how, occasionally, they are rewarded with enormous insights.

Chadbourn appears to be a busy man. After starting his career with four horror novels, at the time I write this, he's now two-thirds into his second fantasy series (*The Dark Age*). That's a nice weighty number of books. The good thing about coming to an author such as this, at this point in his career, is that there's so much material to catch up with.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.





# BOOKS

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## JAMES SALLIS

*The Line Between*, by Peter S. Beagle, Tachyon Publications, 2006, \$14.95.

*The Empire of Ice Cream*, by Jeffrey Ford, Golden Gryphon Press, 2006, \$24.95.

**I**N THE current spate of high fantasy novels, trilogies, and series, book after book trailing off to the horizon like Burma Shave signs, it becomes all too easy to forget the specific pleasures of classic fantasy and what drew us to it initially. That sense of otherness, of a world gone suddenly off-kilter, of unsuspected depths, signs and wonders. We are looking for escape, certainly — escape from the mundane, from what Heidegger terms “dailiness,” that so slyly takes over our lives — but more than that, we’re looking for intensity: seeking, not unreality, but a hyperreality. And if what we find seems somehow connected

to currents deep within us, archetypes at once as familiar and as strange as our own blood, then all the better.

Peter Beagle’s new collection, *The Line Between*, contains eleven stories, including “Two Hearts,” a much-trumpeted and wholly wonderful “sequel” to Beagle’s *The Last Unicorn*, and my personal favorites, “Quarry” and “A Dance for Emilia,” stories richer than many another writer’s novels. In “Quarry,” as in “Two Hearts,” Beagle revisits a world previously created, that of *The Innkeeper’s Song*, to tell the story of a young man in flight from three scary things: two killer trackers, and his own youth.

I never went back to my room, that night. I knew I had an hour at most before they would have guards on the door. What was on my back, at my belt, and in my pockets was all I took — that, and all the *tilgit* the cook could scrape



together and cram into my pouch.

Beagle writes some of the best opening and ending lines around. And he has an amazing identification with adolescents, among whom he discovers his most convincing and sympathetic protagonists. I say "discovers" because one forever feels that the story is not so much being written by Beagle as it is somehow simply passing *through* him on its way to us.

Each story is framed by comments from the author, some of them a few lines, others running to half a page — and one giving credence to my remark just above. I immediately flagged it as something I wanted to take in to read to my students.

Looking back at "Salt Wine," I realize that almost every story I've ever written from a first-person point of view has been completely improvised according to the narrator's voice. It's a matter of trusting the source; of assuming that the storyteller knows what he or she is doing, even if I don't, and that the tale will structure itself and tell me when it's done.

Just that kind of relaxed unfolding, that unhurried, unharried discovery of the narrative, is evident in all of Beagle's work. There is, too, everywhere a gentleness and easy humor. His love for his characters and his joy in writing, like a light behind the page, shows through every word, every sentence, every line.

From "Gordon, the Self-made Cat" with its message that attitude is everything — almost; to "El Regalo," a Buffyesque tale of two Korean-American siblings discovering their powers; to the open-road adventure of "Quarry" and the melancholy of "Salt Wine" and "A Dance for Emilia," faultlessly Beagle reels us in, leaning in close, as though to whisper in our ears, to let his characters tell us important things.

At the end of "A Dance for Emilia," one of those rare stories that seems to be about *everything* that's important, a girl named Luz waits for baby Alex to wake and dances as she waits, a dance that quietly sums up at least four lives.

Luz was still dancing on the sidewalk when the taxi came to take me to the train station. I said goodbye as I walked past her, trying not to stare. But

she danced me escort to the cab door, and I looked into her eyes as I got in, and as we drove away. And what I think I know, I think I know, and it doesn't matter at all.

Peter Beagle's writing here, as always, is replete with such passages, passages in which for the moment, as we read them, we float above our earthbound bodies and feel the mystery and the wonder of our lives break into blossom around us.

Jeffrey Ford, whose previous collection *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant* and novel *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* I reviewed in these pages, also got a free ride to class. Two or three pages into *The Empire of Ice Cream*, I knew I'd be back-packing this baby into the wilds of "CRW 272: Structuring the Novel."

This description from "Boatman's Holiday," for example, as Charon sets off on yet another journey across The River of Pain:

Beneath a blazing orange sun, he maneuvered his boat between the two petrified oaks that grew so high their tops were lost in violet clouds. Their vast trunks and com-

plexity of branches were bone white, as if hidden just below the surface of the murky water was a stag's head the size of a mountain. Thousands of crows, like black leaves, perched amid the pale tangle, staring silently down.

Or this, of a mural at the neighborhood bar to which the narrator's father used to take him, from "A Night in the Tropics":

There were palm trees with coconuts and stretches of pale sand sloping down to a shoreline where the serene sea rolled in lazy wavelets. The sky was robin's egg blue, the ocean, six different shades of aquamarine. All down the beach, here and there, frozen forever in different poses, were island ladies wearing grass skirts but otherwise naked save for the flowers in their hair.

At the mural's bottom edge, "just before paradise came to an end by the bathroom door," the hand of an unseen watcher pushes aside the wide leaf of a plant to spy on the scene.

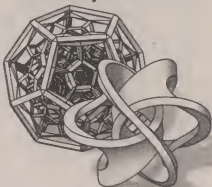
Nothing sensational there. Just

good, solid, evocative writing — writing wholly in the service of the story. Which is what you find crackling and popping beneath your feet like gravel all the long way of *The Empire of Ice Cream*. Ford is among the major practitioners of what Michael Swanwick has called hard fantasy, literature of the fantastic that's original rather than conventional, challenging rather than comforting, fantasy that attempts to penetrate, by that subterfuge at the heart of all art, to the very heart of human nature and the nature of the world.

The centerpiece, of course, is the award-winning title story, Ford's take on the doppelgänger theme, a beautifully realized and written story essaying the blur the boundary between the sensual and authentic worlds. The protagonist of "The Empire of Ice Cream," the man whose fantasy becomes real, or whose reality becomes fantasy, is a musician, and artists of one sort or another abound in Ford's work, almost to the point of preoccupation with creativity and its manifestations.

In the passage above describing the mural, writer and reader are equally behind that painted hand pulling back the leaf to look on. Add to it the fact that this story is

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about an adult returning to the place of his youth and seeing it anew, and you begin to get some sense of the reflections and reverberations going on in Ford's work.

"Man of Light" is about an artist who creates his work of nothing substantial, but of light itself, and who makes of himself a mere bobbing head. Charon in "Boatman's Holiday" meets the author of his myth and becomes a collaborator, shaping the story he was once but a part of. The narrator of "Coffins on the River" is a failing writer. The previously unpublished "Botch Town" is a coming of age story,

letting us look on as a child moves towards becoming a writer, the plywood toy town he has constructed on two sawhorses starting to reflect — and shape? — the actual town it shadows.

In a recent interview, Ford echoed Beagle on letting stories have their way:

I don't plan, don't take notes, don't have any idea where the thing is going. Writing fiction for me is the art of letting go, taking my hands off the steering wheel. If I second-guess and get nervous and try to start giving the guy in my head who writes the stories directions and advice on how to drive, there's a good chance the story

is going to get lost or wind up in a ditch.

As with Beagle, the surprise and delight that Ford discovers in the process is amply communicated to the reader. The writer, like any artist, must always struggle against the gravity of skill, against doing again what he or she knows how to do — must accept (as Ford says here) "the wonderful burden of words."

If all that sounds a bit heady, it's not meant to. Beagle's and Ford's alike, these are first and foremost, and most emphatically, *stories*, good stories, some of them great stories, stories that open windows onto other minds, doors into other worlds.



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*Earlier this year, we published M. Rickert's breathtaking ghost story, "Journey into the Kingdom." Now Ms. Rickert takes us to New England with a dark and bewitching tale of modern sorcery...of a sort.*

*Those of you who have enjoyed Ms. Rickert's stories over the past decade will be pleased to know that many of them will appear soon, accompanied by a new novella, in a collection entitled Map of Dreams. There's even a peek inside the F&SF files in the afterword by some bloke named Van Gelder.*

# The Christmas Witch

*By M. Rickert*

**T**HE CHILDREN OF STONE collect bones, following cats through twisted narrow streets, chasing them away from tiny birds, dead gray mice

(with sweet round ears, pink inside like seashells), and fish washed on rocky shore. The children show each other their bone collections, tiny white femurs, infinitesimal wings, jawbones with small teeth intact. Occasionally, parents find these things; they scold the little hoarder, or encourage the practice by setting up a science table. It's a stage children go through, they assume, this fascination with structure, this cold approach to death. The parents do not discuss it with each other, except in passing. ("Oh yes, the skeleton stage.") The parents do not know, they do not guess that once the found bones are tossed out or put on display, the children begin to collect again. They collect in earnest.

Rachel Boyle has begun collecting bones, though her father doesn't know about it, of course. Her mother, being dead, might know. Rachel can't figure that part out. Her mother is not a ghost, the Grandma told her, but a spirit. The Grandma lives far away, in Milwaukee. Rachel didn't

even remember her when she came for the funeral. "You remember me, honey, don't you?" she asked and Rachel's father said, "Of course she remembers you." Rachel went in the backyard where she tore flowers while her father and the Grandma sat at the kitchen table and cried. After the Grandma left, Rachel and her father moved to Stone.

Rachel doesn't get off the school bus at her house, because her father is still at work. She gets off at Peter Williamson's house. The first time she found Peter with his bone collection spread out before him on the bedroom floor she thought it was gross. But the second time she sat across from him and asked him what they were for.

Peter shrugged. "You know," he said.

Rachel shook her head.

"Didn't they teach you anything in Boston? They're for Wilmot Redd, the witch. You know. A long time ago. An old lady. She lived right here in Stone. They hung her. There's a sign about her on Old Burial Hill but she's not buried there. No one knows where she ended up."

That's when Rachel began collecting bones. She stored them in her sock drawer, she stored them under her bed, she had several in her jewelry box, and two chicken legs buried in the flowerpot from her mother's funeral. The flowers were dead, but it didn't matter, she wouldn't let her father throw them out.

For Halloween, Rachel wants to be dead but her father says she can't be. "How about a witch?" he says, "Or a princess?"

"Peter's going to be dead," she says. "He'll have a knife going right through the top of his head, and blood dripping down his face."

"How about a cat? You can have a long tail and whiskers."

"Mariel is going to be a pilgrim."

"You can be a pilgrim."

"Pilgrims are dead! Jeez, Dad, didn't they teach you anything in Boston?"

"Don't talk to me like that."

Rachel sighs, "Okay, I'll be a witch."

"Fine, we'll paint your face green and you can wear a wig."

"Not that kind of witch."

Her father turns out the light and kisses her on the forehead before he leaves her alone in the dark. All of a sudden Rachel is scared. She thinks

of calling her father. Instead, she counts to fifty before she pulls back the covers and sneaks around in the dark of her room, gathering the bones, which she pieces together into a sort of puzzle shape of a funny little creature, right on top of her bed. She uses a skull, and a long bone that might be from a fish, the small shape of a mouse paw, and a couple of chicken legs. She sucks her thumb while she waits for it to do the silly dance again.

On Tuesday, Mrs. Williamson has a doctor's appointment. Rachel still gets off the bus with Peter. They still go to his house. There, the babysitter waits for them. Her name is Melinda. She has long blonde hair, a pierced navel, pierced tongue, ears pierced all the way around the edge, and rings on every finger. She wraps her arms around Peter and wrestles him to the floor. He screams but he is smiling. After a while she lets go and turns to Rachel.

Rachel wishes Melinda would wrap her arms around her, but she doesn't. "My name's Melinda," she says. Rachel nods. Her father already told her. He wouldn't let her be watched by a stranger. "Who wants popcorn?" Melinda says and races Peter into the kitchen. Rachel follows even though she doesn't really like popcorn.

Peter tells Melinda about his plans for Halloween. He tells her about the knife through his head while the oil heats up in the pan. Melinda tosses in a kernel. Peter runs out of the room.

"What are you going to be?" Melinda asks but before Rachel can answer, Peter is back in the kitchen, the knife in his head, blood dripping around the eyes. Melinda says, "Oh gross, that's so great, it looks really gross." The kernel pops. Melinda pours more kernels into the pan and then slaps the lid on. "Hey, dead man," she says, "How about getting the butter?"

Peter gets a stick of butter out of the refrigerator. He places it on the cutting board. He takes a sharp knife out of the silverware drawer. Popcorn steam fills the kitchen. Rachel feels sleepy, sitting at the island. She leans her head into her hand; her eyes droop. Peter makes a weird sound and drops the knife on the counter. Blood trickles from his finger and over the butter. Melinda sets the pan on a cold burner, turns off the stove, and wraps Peter's finger in paper towel. Rachel isn't positive but she thinks Peter is crying beneath his mask.

"It's okay," Melinda says. "It's just a little cut." She steers Peter through the kitchen toward the bathroom. Rachel looks at the blood on the butter; one long red drop drips down the side. She stares at the kitchen window, foggy with steam. For a second she thinks someone is standing out there, watching, but no one is. Peter and Melinda come back into the kitchen. Peter no longer has the knife through his head. His hair is stuck up funny, his face, pink, and he has a band-aid on his finger. He sits at the island beside Rachel but doesn't look at her. Melinda slices the bloody end of butter and tosses it into the trash. She cuts a chunk off, places it in a glass bowl and sticks it in the microwave. "So, what are you going to be for Halloween?"

"Wilmot Redd," Rachel says.

"You can't," says Melinda.

"Don't you know anything?" Peter asks.

"Be nice, Peter." Melinda pours the popcorn into a big purple bowl and drips melted butter over it. "You can't be Wilmot Redd."

"Why not?"

Melinda puts ice in three glasses and fills them with Dr. Pepper. She sits down at the island, across from Peter and Rachel. "If I tell you, you can't tell your dad."

Rachel has heard about secrets like this. When a grownup tells you not to tell your parents something, it is a bad secret. Rachel is thrilled to be told one. "I won't," she says.

"Okay, I know you think witches wear pointy black hats and act like the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz* but they don't. Witches are just regular people and they look and dress like everyone else. Stone is full of witches. I can't tell you who all is a witch, but you would be surprised. Who knows? Maybe you'll grow up to be a witch yourself. All that stuff about witches is a lie. People have been lying about witches for a very long time. And that's what happened to Wilmot Redd. Maybe she wasn't even a witch at all, but one thing for sure she wasn't an evil witch. That's the part that's made up about witches and that's what they made up about her, and that's how come she wound up dead. You can't dress up as Wilmot Redd. We just don't make fun of her in Stone. Even though it happened a long time ago, most people here still feel really bad about it. Most people think she was just an old woman who was into herbs and shit, don't tell your dad I said



'shit' either, all right? Making fun of Wilmot Redd is like saying you think witches should be hung. You don't think that do you? All right then, so don't dress up as Wilmot Redd. You can go as a made-up witch, but leave poor Wilmot Redd out of it. No one even knows what happened to her, I mean after she died. That's how much she didn't matter. They threw her body off a cliff somewhere. No one even knows where her bones ended up. They could be anywhere."

"Do you collect bones?" Rachel asks and Peter kicks her.

"Why would I do that?" Melinda says. "You have some weird ideas, kid."



ITCHES EVERYWHERE. Teacher witches, mommy and daddy witches, policeman witches too, boy witches and girl witches, smiling witches, laughing witches, bus driver witches. Who is not a witch in

Stone? Rachel isn't, she knows that for sure.

Rachel makes special requests for chicken "with the bones," she says, and she eats too much, giving herself a stomachache.

"How many bones do you need?" her father asks, because Rachel has told him she needs them for a school project.

"I don't know," she says. "Jack just keeps saying I need more."

"Jack sounds kind of bossy," her father says.

Rachel nods. "Yeah, but he's funny too."

Finally, Halloween arrives. Rachel goes to school dressed as a made-up witch. She notices that there are several of them on the bus and the playground. They start the morning with doughnuts and apple cider and then they do math with questions like two pumpkins plus one pumpkin equals how many pumpkins.

Rachel raises her hand and the lady at the front of the room who says she is Miss Engstrom, their teacher, but who doesn't look anything like her, says, "Yes, Rachel?"

"How many bones does it take to make a body?"

"That's a very good question," the lady says. She's wearing a long purple robe and she has black hair that keeps sliding around funny on her head. "I'll look that up for you, Rachel, but in the meantime, can you

answer my question? You have two pumpkins and then your mother goes to the store and comes home with one more pumpkin, how many pumpkins do you have?"

"Her mother is dead," a skeleton in the back of the room says.

"I don't care," says Rachel.

"I mean your father," the lady says. "I meant to say your father goes to the store."

But Rachel just sits there and the lady calls on someone else.

They get an extra long recess. Cindi Becker tears her princess dress on the swing and cries way louder than Peter cried when he cut his finger. Somebody dressed all in black, with a black hood, won't speak to anyone but walks slowly through the playground, stopping occasionally to point a black-gloved finger at one of the children. When one of the kindergartners gets pointed at, he runs, screaming, back to his teacher, who is dressed up as a pirate.

Rachel finds Peter with the knife in his head and says, "Don't tell, but I'm still going to be Wilmot Redd tonight." The boy turns to her, but doesn't say anything at all, just walks away. After a while, Rachel realizes that there are three boys on the playground with knives in their heads, and she isn't sure if the one she spoke to was Peter.

They don't have the party until late in the afternoon. The lady who says she is Miss Engstrom turns off the lights and closes the drapes.

Rachel raises her hand. The lady nods at her.

"When my mom went to the store a bad man shot her — "

The lady waves her arms, as if trying to put out a fire, the purple sleeves dangling from her wrists. "Rachel, Rachel," she says. "I'm so sorry about your mother. I should have said your father went to the store. I'm really sorry. Maybe I should tell a story about witches."

"My mother is not a witch," Rachel says.

"No, no of course she's not a witch. Let's play charades!"

Rachel sits at her desk. She is a good girl for the most part. But she has learned that even without her face painted, she can pretend to be listening when she isn't. Nobody notices that she isn't playing their stupid game. Later, when she is going to the bus, the figure all dressed in black points at her. She feels the way the kindergartner must have felt. She feels like crying. But she doesn't cry.

She gets off the bus at Peter Williamson's house with Peter who acts crazy, screaming for no reason, letting the door slam right in her face. I hate you, Peter, she thinks, and is surprised to discover that nothing bad happens to her for having this thought. But when she opens the door, Melinda is standing there, next to Peter who still has the knife in his head.

"Don't you understand? You can't dress up as Wilmot Redd."

"Where's Mrs. Williamson?" Rachel asks.

"She had to go to the doctor's. Did you hear me?"

"I'm not," Rachel says, walking past Melinda. "Can't you see I'm just a made-up witch?"

"Is that what you're wearing tonight?"

Rachel nods.

"Who wants popcorn?" Melinda says. Rachel sticks her tongue out at Peter. He just stands there, with the knife in his head.

"Hey, aren't you guys hungry?" Melinda calls from the kitchen.

Peter runs, screaming, past Rachel. She walks in the other direction, to Peter's room. She knows where he keeps his collection, in his bottom drawer. Peter hasn't said anything about it, maybe he hasn't noticed, but Rachel has been stealing bones from him for some time now. Today she takes a handful. She doesn't have any pockets so she drops the bones into her Halloween treat bag from school. She is careful not to set the bag down. She is still carrying it when her father comes to get her.

They walk home together, through the crooked streets of Stone. The sky is turning gray. Ghosts and witches dangle from porches and crooked trees behind picket fences. Pumpkins grin blackly at her.

Rachel's father says that after dinner Melinda is coming over.

"She just wants to see what kind of witch I am," Rachel says.

Her father smiles, "Yes, I'm sure you're right. Also, I asked her if she could stay and pass out treats while I go with you. That way no one will play a trick on us."

"Melinda might," Rachel says, but her father just laughs, as if she were being funny.

When they get home, Rachel goes into her bedroom while her father makes dinner. He's making macaroni and cheese, her favorite, though tonight, the thought of it makes her strangely queasy. Rachel begins to gather the bones from all the various hiding places, the box under her bed,

the sock drawer. She puts them in a pillowcase. When her father calls her for dinner, she shoves the pillowcase under her bed.

In the kitchen, a man stands next to the stove with a knife in his head. Rachel screams, and her father tears off the mask. He tells her he's sorry. "See," he lifts the mask up by the knife. "It's just something I bought at the drugstore. I thought it would be funny."

Rachel tries to eat but she doesn't have much of an appetite. She picks at the yellow noodles until the doorbell rings. Her father answers it and comes back with Melinda who smiles and says, "How's the little witch?"

"Not dead," Rachel answers.

Rachel's father looks at her as if she has a knife in her head.

They go from house to house begging for candy. The witches of Stone drop M&M's, peanut butter cups, and popcorn balls into Rachel's plastic pumpkin. Once, a ghost answers the door, and once, when she reaches into a bowl for a small Hershey's bar, a green hand pops up through the candy and tries to grab her. Little monsters, giant spiders, made-up witches, and bats weave gaily around Rachel and her father. The pumpkins, lit from within, grin at her. Rachel thinks of Wilmot Redd standing on Old Burial Hill watching all of them, waiting for her to bring the bones.

But when Rachel gets home, the bones are gone. The pillowcase, filled with most of her collection and shoved under her bed, is missing. Rachel runs into the living room, just in time to see Melinda leaving with a white bundle under her arm. Rachel stands there, in her fake witch costume and thinks, *I wish you were dead*. She has a lot of trouble getting to sleep that night. She cries and cries and her father asks her over and over again if it's because of her mother. Rachel doesn't tell him about the bones. She doesn't know why. She just doesn't.

Two days later, Melinda is killed in a car accident. Rachel's father wipes tears from his eyes when he tells her. Mrs. Williamson cries when she thinks Peter and Rachel aren't watching. But Peter and Rachel don't cry.

"She stole my bones," Rachel says.

"Mine too," says Peter. "She stole a bunch of them."

Melinda's school picture is on the front page of the newspaper, beside a photograph of the fiery wreck.

"That's what she gets," Rachel says, "for stealing."

Peter frowns at Rachel.

"Wanna trade?" she asks.

He nods. Rachel trades a marshmallow pumpkin for a small bone shaped like a toe.

That night, after her father kisses her on the forehead and turns off the light, she takes her small collection of bones and tries to make them dance, but the shape is all wrong. It just lies there and doesn't do anything at all.

The day of Melinda's funeral, Rachel's father doesn't go to work. He's a lawyer in Boston and it isn't easy, the way it is for some parents, to stay home on a workday, but he does. He picks Rachel up at school just after lunch.

The funeral is in a church in the new section of Stone, far from the harbor and Old Burial Hill. On the way there, they pass a group of people carrying signs.

"Close your eyes," her father says.

Rachel closes her eyes. "What are they doing?"

"They're protesting. They're against abortion."

"What's abortion?"

"Okay, you can open them. Abortion is when a woman is pregnant and decides she doesn't want to be pregnant."

"You mean like magic?"

"No, it's not magic. She has a procedure. The procedure is called having an abortion. When that's over, she's not pregnant anymore."

Rachel looks out the car window at the pumpkins with collapsed faces, the falling ghosts, a giant spiderweb dangling in a tree. "Dad?"

"Mmhm?"

"Can we move back to Boston?"

Her father glances down at her. "Don't you feel safer here? And you already have so many friends. Mrs. Williamson says you and Peter get along great. And there's your friend, Jack. Maybe we can have him over some Saturday."

"Melinda said there are a lot of witches in Stone."

Her father whistles, one long low sound. "Well, she was probably just trying to be funny. Here we are." They are parked next to a church. "This is where Melinda's funeral is."

"Okay," says Rachel but neither of them move to get out of the car.

"Let's say a prayer for Melinda," her father says.

"Here?"

He closes his eyes and bows his head while Rachel watches a group of teenage girls in cheerleading uniforms hugging on the church steps.

"Now, do you wanna get ice cream?"

Rachel can't believe she's heard right. She knows about funerals and they don't have anything to do with ice cream, but she nods, and he turns the car around, right in the middle of the street, just as the church bells ring. Rachel's father drives all the way back to the old section of Stone, where they stop for ice cream. Rachel has peppermint stick and her father has vanilla. They walk on the sidewalk next to the water and watch the seagulls. Rachel tries not to think about Wilmot Redd who stands on Old Burial Hill, waiting.

Her father looks at his watch. "We have to get going," he says. "It's almost time for Peter to get off the bus."

"Peter?"

"His mother has to go to the doctor's. I told her he could come to our house."

Rachel's father goes out to meet Peter when he gets off the bus and they walk in together, talking about the Red Sox. They walk right past Rachel. "Dad?" she says but he doesn't answer. She follows them into the kitchen. Her father is spreading cream cheese on a bagel for Peter. Later, when she is playing in her bedroom with him, Rachel says, "I wish your mom had an abortion," which makes Peter cry. When her father comes into the room he makes her tell him what she did and she tells him she didn't do anything but Peter tells on her and her father says she is grounded.

**M**ISS ENGSTROM tells them that they are very lucky to live in Stone, so near to Danvers and Salem and the history of witches. Rachel says that she knows there are a lot of witches in Stone and Miss Engstrom laughs and then all the children laugh too. Later, on the playground, Stella Miner and Leanne Green hold hands and stick out their tongues at Rachel, and Minnity Dover throws pebbles at her. Miss Engstrom catches Minnity

and makes her sit on the bench for the rest of recess. Rachel swings so high that she can imagine she is flying. When the bell rings, she comes back to Earth where Bret and Steve Keeter, the twins, and Peter Williamson wait for her. "We wish your mom had an abortion," Peter says. The twins nod their golden heads.

"You don't even know what that means," says Rachel and runs past them, toward Miss Engstrom who stands beside the open door, frowning.

"Rachel," she says, "You're late." But she doesn't say anything to the boys, who come in behind Rachel, whispering.

"Shut up!" Rachel shouts.

Miss Engstrom sends Rachel to the office. The principal says he is going to call her father. Rachel sits in the office until it's almost time to go home, and then she goes back to the classroom for her books and lunchbox.

"Wanna know what we did while you were gone?" Clara Vanmeer whispers when they line up for the bus.

Rachel ignores her. She knows what they did. They are witches, all of them, and they put some kind of spell on her. *I wish you were all dead*, Rachel thinks, and she really means it. It worked with Melinda, didn't it? But not her mom. She never wished her mom would die. Never never never. Who did? Who wished that for her mother who used to call her Rae-Rae and made chocolate chip pancakes and was beautiful? Rachel hugs her backpack and stares out the window at the witches of Stone, picking their kids up from school. The bus drives past rotten pumpkins and fallen graveyards. Rachel's head hurts. She hopes Mrs. Williamson will let her take a nap but when they get there, the house is locked. Peter rings the doorbell five hundred times, and pulls on the door but Rachel just sits on the step. Nobody is home, why can't he just get that through his head? Finally, Peter starts to cry. "Shut up," Rachel says. She has to say it twice before he does.

"Where's my mother?" Peter asks, wiping his nose with the sleeve of his jacket.

"How should I know?" Rachel watches a small black cat with a tiny silver bell around its neck emerge from the bush at the neighbor's house. Unfortunately, it is not carrying a dead bird or mouse.

Peter starts crying again. Loudly. Rachel's head hurts. "Shut up!" she

says, but he just keeps crying. She stands up and readjusts her backpack.

Rachel is already walking down the tiny sidewalk when Peter calls for her to wait. They walk to Rachel's house, but of course that is locked as well. Peter starts crying again. Rachel takes off the backpack and sets it on the step. The afternoon sun is low, the sky gray and fuzzy like a sweater. Her head hurts and she's hungry. Also, Peter is really annoying her, "I want my mother," he says.

"Well, I want my mother too," Rachel says. "But that doesn't help. She's dead, okay? She's dead."

"My mom's dead?" Peter screams, so loud that Rachel has to cover her ears with her hands. That's when Mrs. Williamson comes running up the sidewalk. Peter doesn't even see her at first because he's so hysterical. Mrs. Williamson runs to Peter. She sits down beside him, says his name, and touches him on the shoulder. He looks up and shouts, "Mom!" He wraps his arms around her, saying over and over again, "You're not dead." Rachel resists the temptation to look down the sidewalk to see if her own mother is coming. She knows she is not.

They walk back to the Williamsons' house together. Rachel, trying not to drag her backpack, follows. "I'm sorry," she hears Mrs. Williamson say. "I had a doctor's appointment and I got caught in traffic. I tried to call the school, but I was too late, and then I tried to find someone to come to the house, but no one was home."

Peter says something to Mrs. Williamson. She can't hear him and she leans over so he can whisper in her ear. Rachel stands behind them, watching. Mrs. Williamson turns and stares at Rachel. "Did you tell him I was dead?" she asks.

Rachel shakes her head no, but she can tell Mrs. Williamson doesn't believe her.

"When the Pilgrims came to America they wanted to live in a place where they could practice their religion. They were trying to be good people. So when they saw someone doing something they thought was bad, they wanted to stop it. Bad meant the devil to them. They didn't want to be around the devil. They wanted to be around God." Miss Engstrom stands at the front of the room dressed as a Puritan. She puts the Puritan



dress on every day for Social Studies. Her cheeks are pink and her hair is sticking to her face. She is trying to help them understand what happened, she says, but Cindi Becker has said, more than once, that her mom doesn't want Miss Engstrom teaching them religion. "It's not religion," Miss Engstrom says, "it's History."

Every day Miss Engstrom puts on the Pilgrim dress and pretends she's a Puritan. The children are supposed to pretend they are witches. "Act natural," she tells them. "Just be yourselves." But when they do, they get in trouble; they have to stand in the stockade or go to the jail in the back of the room. The stockade is made out of cardboard, and the jail is just chairs in a circle. Rachel hates to be put in either place. By the fourth lesson, she has figured out how to sit at her desk with her hands neatly folded. When Miss Engstrom asks Rachel what she is doing, she says, "Praying" and Miss Engstrom tells her what a good Puritan she is. By the sixth lesson the class is filled with good Puritans, sitting with neatly folded hands. Only Charlie Dexter is stuck in the stockade and Cindi Becker is in the jail in the back of the room. Miss Engstrom says that they are probably witches. Rachel decides that Social Studies is her favorite subject. She looks forward to the next lesson. What will happen to the witches when they go on trial? But the next day they have a substitute and the day after that, another. They have so many substitutes Rachel can't remember their names. One day, one of the substitutes tells the class that she is their new teacher.

"What happened to Miss Engstrom?" Rachel asks.

"My mother had her fired," says Cindi Becker.

"She's not coming back," the teacher says. "Now, let's talk about Thanksgiving."

Rachel is so excited about Thanksgiving she can't stand it. A whole turkey! Think of the bones! Each night Rachel rearranges her bone collection. It is a difficult time of year for it. Cats still wander the crooked streets of Stone but they are either eating everything they kill, or killing less, because there are few bones to be found. Rachel arranges and rearranges, trying to form the shape that will dance for her. Damn that Melinda, Rachel thinks. What would happen if Rachel had bones like that in her collection? Human bones?

Rachel has a fit when her father tells her they are going to the

Williamsons' house for Thanksgiving. "This will be better," he says. "You can play with Peter and his cousins. Don't you think it would be lonely with just you and me at our house?"

"The bones!" Rachel cries. "I want the bones!"

"What are you talking about?" her father asks.

Rachel sniffs. "I want the turkey bones."

Rachel's father stares at her. He is cutting an apple and he stands, holding the knife, staring at her.

"You know, for my project."

"Are you still doing that, now that Miss Engstrom is gone?"

Rachel nods. Her father says, "Well, we can make a turkey. But not on Thursday. On Thursday we're going to the Williamsons'."

The night before Thanksgiving though, her father gets a phone call. He says, "Oh, I am so sorry." And, "No, no please don't even worry about us." He nods his head a lot. "Please know you are in our prayers. Let us know if we can do anything." After he hangs up the phone he sits in his chair and stares at the TV screen. Finally, he says, "It looks like you got your wish."

He looks at his watch, and then, all in a hurry, they drive to the grocery store, where he buys a turkey, bags of stuffing, and pumpkin pie. He throws the food into the cart. Rachel can tell that he is angry but she doesn't ask him what's wrong. She'd rather not know. Besides, she has other stuff to worry about. Like is there a bad man in this store? Will he shoot them the way he shot her mother?

When they get home her father says, "Mrs. Williamson lost the baby."

"What baby?" Rachel asks.

"She was pregnant. But she lost it."

Rachel remembers, once, when Mrs. Williamson got angry at Peter when he came home from school without his sweater. "You can't be so careless all the time," Rachel remembers her saying.

"Well, she shouldn't be so careless," Rachel says.

"Rachel, you have to start learning to think about other people's feelings once in a while."

Rachel thinks about the lost baby, out in the dark somewhere. "Mrs. Williamson is stupid," she says.

Rachel's father, holding a can of cranberry sauce with one hand,

points toward her room with the other. "You go to your room," he says. "And think about what you're saying."

Rachel runs to her room. She slams the door shut. She throws herself on her bed and cries herself to sleep. When she wakes up there is no light shining under the door. She doesn't know what time it is, but she thinks it is very late. She gets up and begins collecting bones from all the hiding places; bones in her socks, bones in her underwear drawer, bones in a box under the bed, bones in her jewelry box, and bones in her stuffed animals, cut open with the scissors she's not supposed to use. She hums as she assembles and reassembles the bones until at last they quiver and shake. She thinks they are going to dance for her but instead, they stab her with their sharp little points.

"Stop it," Rachel says. She takes them apart again, stores them in separate places and goes to sleep, crying for her mother.

The next morning, Rachel watches the parade on TV while her father makes stuffing and cleans the turkey. When the phone rings, he brings it to Rachel, and turns the TV sound off. The Grandma asks her how school is going and how she likes living in Stone, and finally, how is she? Rachel answers each question, "Fine," while watching a silent band march across the TV. The Grandma asks to speak to her father again and Rachel goes to the kitchen. Her father reaches for the phone and says, "My God, Rachel, what happened to your arms?" Rachel looks down at her arms. There are small red spots and tiny bruises all over them.

"She has bruises all over her arms," her father says.

Rachel grabs a stick of celery and walks toward the living room. Her father follows, still holding the phone. "Rachel, what happened to your arms?"

Rachel turns and smiles at him. Ever since her mom died, her dad has been trying hard. Rachel knows this, and she knows that he doesn't know she knows this. But there are certain things he isn't very good at. Rachel is positive that if her mom were still alive, she wouldn't even have to ask what had happened, she'd know. Rachel feels sorry for her dad but she doesn't want to tell him about the bones. Look what happened when she barely even mentioned them to Melinda. So Rachel makes something up instead. "Miss Engstrom," she says.

"What are you talking about? Miss Engstrom? She isn't even your teacher anymore."

Rachel only smiles, sweetly, at her father. He repeats what she told him, into the phone. Rachel walks into the living room. She wraps herself in the red throw and sits in front of the TV, watching the balloon man fill up the screen as she munches on celery. How many bones does it take, anyway? Miss Engstrom never did answer her question.

Later, when the doorbell rings, her father shouts, "I'll get it," which is sort of strange because she is never allowed to answer the door. She hears voices and then her father comes into the room with a policeman and a policewoman. Rachel thinks they've come to arrest her. She's a liar, a thief, and a murderer, so it had to happen. Still, she feels like crying now that it has.

Her father has been talking to her, she realizes, but she has no idea what he's said. He turns the sound off the TV and he and the policeman walk out of the room together. The policewoman stays with Rachel. She sits right next to Rachel on the couch. For a while they watch the silent parade, until the policewoman says, "Can you tell me what happened to your arms, Rachel?"

"I already told my dad," Rachel says.

The policewoman nods. "The thing is, I just want to make sure he didn't leave anything out."

"I don't want to get in trouble."

"You're not in trouble. We are here to help. Okay, honey? Can I see your arms?"

Rachel shakes her head, no.

The policewoman nods. "Who hurt you, Rachel?"

Rachel turns to look at her. She has blonde hair and brown eyes with yellow flecks in them. She looks at Rachel very closely. As if she knows the truth about her.

"You can tell me," she says.

"The bones," Rachel whispers.

"What about the bones?"

"But you can't tell anyone."

"I might have to tell someone," the policewoman says.

So Rachel refuses to speak further. She shows the lady her arms, but

only because she figures it will make her go away, and it does. After she looks at Rachel's arms the policewoman goes out in the kitchen with her dad and the policeman. Rachel turns up the volume. Jessica Simpson, dressed in white fur, like a kitten without the whiskers, is singing. Her voice fills up the room, but Rachel can still hear the murmuring sound of the grownups talking in the kitchen. Then the door opens and closes and she hears her father saying good-bye. Rachel's father comes and stands in the room, watching her. He doesn't say anything and Rachel doesn't either but later, when they are eating turkey together he says, "You might still be just a little girl but you can get grownups in a lot of trouble by telling lies."

Rachel nods. She knows this. Miss Engstrom taught them all about the history of witches. Rachel chews the turkey leg clean. It was huge and she is quite full, but now she has a turkey leg, almost as big as a human bone, to add to her collection. She sets it on her napkin next to her plate. As if he can read her mind her father says, "Rachel, no more bones."

"What?"

"Your bone collection. It's done. Over. Find something else to collect. Seashells. Buttons. Barbie dolls. No more bones."

Rachel knows better than to argue. Instead, she asks to be excused. Her father doesn't even look at her; he just nods. Rachel goes to her bedroom and searches through the mess of clothes in the wicker chair until she finds her Halloween costume. When her father comes to tell her it's time for bed, he says, "You can wear that one last time but then we're putting it away until next year."

"Can I sleep in it?" Rachel asks.

Her father shrugs. "Sure, why not?" He smiles, but it is a pretend smile. Rachel smiles a pretend smile back. She crawls into bed, dressed like a pretend witch. Her father kisses her on the forehead and turns out the light. Rachel lies there until she counts to a hundred and then she sits up. She gathers the bones, whispering in the dark.

A few days later, the witch costume has been packed away, the first dusting of snow has sprinkled the crooked streets and picket fences of Stone, and Rachel has forgotten all about how angry she was at her father. Since Mrs. Williamson lost the baby, she no longer watches Rachel. Rachel thinks this is a good idea because she doesn't feel safe with Mrs.

Williamson, but she hates being in school all day. All the other children have been picked up from the after school program and it's just Rachel and Miss Carrie who keep looking out the school window, saying, "Boy, your dad sure is late."

Rachel sits at the play table, making a design with the purple, blue, green, and yellow plastic shapes. She is good at putting things together and Miss Carrie compliments her work. Rachel remembers putting the spell on her father and she regrets it. She pretends the shapes are bones, she puts them together and then she takes them apart, she whispers, trying to say the words backward, but it is hard to do and Miss Carrie, who isn't a real grownup at all, but a high school girl like Melinda, says, "Uh, you're starting to creep me out."

Miss Carrie calls her mother, using the purple cell phone she carries in the special cell phone pocket of her jeans. "I don't know what to do," she says. "Rachel is still here. Her dad is really late. Hey, Rache, what's your last name again?" Rachel tells Carrie and Carrie tells her mom. Just then, Mrs. Williamson arrives. She is wearing a raincoat, even though it isn't raining, and her hair is a mess. She tells Carrie that she is taking Rachel home. Rachel doesn't want to go with Mrs. Williamson, the baby loser, but Carrie says, "Oh, great," to Mrs. Williamson and then says into the phone, "Never mind, someone finally came to pick her up." She is still talking to her mother when Rachel leaves with Mrs. Williamson who doesn't say anything until they are in the car.

"Peter told me what you said, Rachel, about how I should have had an abortion, and I want you to know, that sort of talk is not allowed in our house. I really don't even want you playing with Peter anymore. Not one word about abortion or dead mothers or anything else you have up your sleeve, do you understand?"

Rachel nods. She is looking out the window at a house decorated with tiny white icicle lights hanging over the windows. "Where's my dad?" she asks.

Mrs. Williamson sighs, "He's been delayed."

Rachel is afraid to ask what that means. When they get to the Williamsons' house, Mrs. Williamson pretends to be nice. She asks Rachel if her book bag is too heavy and offers to carry it. Rachel shakes her head. She is afraid to say anything for fear that it will be the wrong thing. There

is a big wreath on the back door of the Williamsons' house and it has a bell on it that rings when they go inside. Mr. Williamson and Peter are eating at the kitchen table. The house is deliciously warm but it smells strange.

Mrs. Williamson takes off her raincoat and hangs it from a peg in the wall. Rachel drops her book bag below the coats, and stands there until Mrs. Williamson tells her to hang up her coat and sit at the table.

When Rachel sits down Mr. Williamson points a chicken leg at her and says, "Now listen here, young lady — " but Mrs. Williamson interrupts him.

"I already talked to her," she says.

Rachel is mashing her peas into her potatoes when her father arrives. He thanks Mr. and Mrs. Williamson and he says, "How you doing?" to Peter though Peter doesn't answer. Mrs. Williamson invites him to stay for dinner but he says thank you, he can't. Rachel leaves her plate on the table and no one tells her to clear it. She puts on her coat. Her father picks up her backpack. He thanks the Williamsons again and then taps Rachel's shoulder. Hard.

"Thank you," Rachel says.

They walk out to the car together, their shoes squeaking on the snow. The Williamsons' house is decorated with white lights; the neighbors have colored lights and two big plastic snowmen with frozen grins and strange eyes on their front porch.

"What did you say to that policewoman?" Rachel's father asks.

He isn't looking at Rachel. He is staring out the window, the way he does when he is driving in Boston.

"Miss Engstrom didn't do it," she says.

"They seem to think I hurt you, do you understand — " He doesn't finish what he is saying. He pulls into their driveway, but instead of getting out of the car to open the garage door, he sits there. "Just tell the truth, Rachel, okay? Just tell the truth. You know what that is, don't you?"

"I did," Rachel says. She feels like crying and also, she thinks she might throw up.

"Who did that to you, then? Who did that to your arms?"

"The bones."

"The bones?"

Rachel nods.

"What bones?"

"You know."

Her father makes a strange noise. He is bent over, and his eyes are shut. Praying, Rachel thinks. The car is still running. Rachel looks out the window. She cranes her neck so she can see the Sheekles' yard. They have it decorated with six reindeer made out of white lights. The car door slams. Rachel watches her father open the garage door. She watches him walk back to the car, lit by the headlights, his neck bent as if he is looking for something very important that he has lost.

"Dad?" Rachel says when he gets back in the car. "Are you mad?"

He shakes his head. He eases the car into the garage, turns off the ignition. They walk to the house together. When they get inside, he says, "Okay, I want all of them."

"All of what?" Rachel says, though she thinks she knows.

"That bone collection of yours. I want it."

"No, Dad."

He shakes his head. He stands there in his best winter coat, his gloves still on, shaking his head. "Rachel, why would you want to keep them, if they are hurting you?"

It's a good question. Rachel has to think for a moment before she answers. "Not all the time," she says. "Mostly they don't. They used to be my friend."

"The bones?"

Rachel nods.

"The bones used to be your friend?"

"Jack," she says.

He doesn't look at her. He *is* angry! He lied when he said he wasn't.

"Rachel," he says, softly, "honey? Let's get the bones. Okay? Let's put them away...where they can't...bones aren't...Jesus Christ." He slams his fist on the kitchen table. Rachel jumps. He covers his face with his hands. "Jesus Christ, Marla," he says.

Marla is Rachel's mother's name.

Rachel isn't sure what to do. She takes off her hat and coat. Then she walks into her bedroom and begins gathering the bones. After a while she realizes her father is standing in the doorway, watching.



Rachel hands her father all the bones. "Be careful," she says, "They killed Melinda." He doesn't say anything. That night he forgets to tell Rachel when to go to sleep. She changes into her pajamas, crawls into bed, and waits but he forgets to kiss her. He sits in the living room, making phone calls. The words drift into Rachel's room, "bones, mother murdered, lies, problems in school." Rachel thinks about Christmas. What will she get this year? Will she get a new Barbie? Will she get anything? Or has she been a bad girl? Will someone kill her father? Will Mrs. Williamson come to take care of her, and then lose her the way she lost the baby? Will Santa Claus save her? Will God? Will anyone? Will they get white lights for their tree or colored? Every year they switch but Rachel can't remember what they had last year. Rachel hopes it's a colored light year, because she likes the colored lights best. The last thing she hears before she falls asleep is her father's distant voice. "Bones," he says. "Yes that's right, bones."

The next morning, Rachel's father tells her she isn't going to school. She's going with him to Boston. "I made an appointment for you, okay, honey? I think you need a woman to talk to. So I made an appointment with Dr. Trentwerth."

Rachel is happy not to go to school with the nasty children of Stone. She is happy not to have to sit in the classroom and listen to Mrs. Fizzure who never dresses like a Puritan and doesn't put anyone in the stockade or jail. Rachel is happy to go to Boston. They listen to Christmas music the whole way there. Rachel's appointment isn't until ten o'clock, so she has to sit in her dad's office and be very quiet while he does his work. He gives her paper and pens and she draws pictures of Christmas trees and ghosts while she waits. When it's time to go to her appointment, her father looks at her pictures and says, "These are very nice, Rachel." Rachel actually thinks they are sort of scary though she didn't draw the ghosts the way a kindergartner would, all squiggly lines and black spot eyes. She made them the way they really are, a lady smiling next to a Christmas tree, a baby asleep on a floor, a cat grinning.

Dr. Trentwerth has a long gray braid that snakes down the side of her neck. She's wearing an orange sweater and black pants. Her earrings are triangles of tiny gold bells. She says hello to Rachel's father but she doesn't shake his hand. She shakes Rachel's hand, as if she might be someone

important. They leave her father sitting on the couch looking at a magazine.

Rachel is disappointed by the doctor's office. There are little kid toys everywhere. A stuffed giraffe, a dollhouse, blocks, trucks, and baby dolls with pink baby bottles. Rachel doesn't know what she's supposed to do. "Be polite," she remembers her father telling her.

"You have a nice room," Rachel says.

"Would you like some tea?" the doctor asks. "Or hot cocoa?"

Rachel walks past all the baby toys and sits in the chair by the window. "Cocoa please," she says.

Dr. Trentwerth turns the electric teakettle on. "Your father tells me you've been having some trouble with your bone collection," she says.

"He doesn't believe me."

"He said the bones hurt you."

Rachel nods. Shrugs. "But not all the time. Like I said. Just once."

The doctor tears open a packet of hot cocoa, which she empties into a plain white mug. She pours the water into it. "Let's just let that sit for a while," she says. "It's very hot. Whose bones hurt you, Rachel?"

Rachel sighs. "Cat bones, mice bones, chicken bones, you know."

Dr. Trentwerth nods. "Your father says you moved to Stone after your mother died. What was that like?"

"We were both really sad, me and Dad. Everyone was. We got a lot of flowers."

Dr. Trentwerth hands the mug to Rachel. "Careful, it's still hot."

Dr. Trentwerth is right. It is hot. Rachel brings it toward her mouth but it is too hot. She sets it, carefully, on the table next to the chair.

"Tell me about where you live," the doctor says as she sits down across from Rachel.

"Well, everyone is a witch," Rachel says. "Okay, not everyone, but almost everyone and one time, a long time ago, there was a woman there named Wilmot Redd and some people came and took her away 'cause they said all witches had to die. They hung her and no one did anything about it. Miss Engstrom, she was my teacher, got taken away too, and Melinda, my baby-sitter, died, but that's because she stole the bones and now my father has them and I don't want him to die but he probably will. Mrs. Williamson is this lady who sometimes takes care of me and she looks real

nice but she loses babies and she lost one and no one even is looking for it. If my mom was still alive she would rescue me."

"And the bones?"

"They used to keep me company at night."

"Where would you be when the bones kept you company, Rachel?"

"In my room."

"In your bedroom?"

"Mmhhm."

"I see."

"But then they stopped being nice and started hurting me."

"Whose bones, Rachel?"

"My dad has them now."

"Where did your dad's bones hurt you?"

"They were still mine then."

"Where did the bones hurt you, Rachel?"

"On my body."

"Where on your body?"

Suddenly, Rachel has a bad feeling. How does she know Dr. Trentwerth isn't one of them too? Rachel reaches for her mug and sips the hot cocoa. Dr. Trentwerth sits there, watching.

**T**HE MOON IS not a bone. Rachel knows this, but when the moon stares down at her, like an eye socket, Rachel wonders if she is just a small insect rattling around inside a giant skull. She knows this isn't true.

She's not a baby, after all. She knows this isn't how reality works, but she can't help herself. Sometimes she imagines flying up to the moon, and climbing right through that hole to find everyone she's ever lost on the other side. She doesn't care about Melinda but she cares a lot about her mom and dad.

Rachel no longer lives in Stone and she no longer lives with her father. A lady and two policemen came to school one day and took Rachel away. She was cutting paper snowflakes at the time, and little bits of paper fluttered from her clothes as they walked to the car. Now Rachel lives with the Freemans. Big plastic candy canes line the walk up to the Freemans' front porch, which is decorated with blinking colored lights. A

wreath with tiny gift-wrapped packages glued to it hangs on the front door. (But there are no gifts inside, Rachel checked.) The house smells sweet with the scent of holiday candles. Mrs. Freeman tells Rachel to be careful around the candles and not to bother Mr. Freeman when he is watching TV, which is most of the time.

Rachel's bedroom is in the back of the house. It has green itchy carpet and two twin beds and a dresser that is mostly blue, with some patches of yellow and lime green, as though someone started to paint it and then gave up on the project. The curtains on Rachel's window are faded tiny blue flowers with yellow centers and they are Rachel's favorite things in the room. Lying in her bed, Rachel can look out the window at the moon and imagine crawling right out of her world into a better one.

On the first night, Mrs. Freeman came into the bedroom and held Rachel while she cried and told her things would get better. In the morning, Mr. Freeman drove Rachel to school. He walked with a limp and he burped a lot, but before he left her in the school office he told her she was a brave girl and everything was going to be better soon.

"The Freemans are nice," the lady who took Rachel away from Stone told her. "Mrs. Freeman was once in the same situation you are in. She understands just what you're going through. And Mr. Freeman is a retired police officer. He got shot a few years ago. You're lucky to go there."

But Rachel didn't feel like a lucky girl, even when the Freemans took her to the Christmas tree lot and let her choose their tree, or when Mrs. Freeman put lotion on Rachel's chapped hands, or when they took her to an attorney's office, a very important woman who acted as if everything Rachel said mattered.

Rachel doesn't feel lucky until the day Mr. Freeman says, "Rachel, the lawyers think you should go back and live with your father." Mrs. Freeman cries and says, "Tomorrow's Christmas Eve, how can they do this?" But Rachel is so happy she almost pees in her pants. When the lady comes to pick Rachel up, Mrs. Freeman says, "I have half a mind not to let you take her." But Mr. Freeman says, "Rachel, get your suitcase." Mrs. Freeman hugs Rachel so tightly that for a second she is afraid she really isn't going to let her go, but then she does. The lady who waits for Rachel says, "This isn't my fault. This is hard for all of us." "It's hardest for her," Mrs. Freeman says and after that, Rachel doesn't hear the rest. Down the

street the Mauley kids are building a snowman. "I hate you, George Mauley," Rachel screams at the top of her lungs. "What did you do that for?" the lady asks. "Get in the car." But Rachel has no idea why she did it. As they drive past the Mauley children, Rachel turns her face toward the window, so her back is to the lady. She sticks her tongue out at George Mauley but he is busy putting stones in the snowman's eyes and doesn't notice. "I want you to know, you are not alone," the woman says. "Maybe things didn't work out this time, but we are watching. You just keep telling the truth, Rachel, and I promise you things will get better."

It starts snowing. Not a lot, just tiny flakes fluttering down the white sky. Rachel remembers the snowflake she had been cutting when the lady took her away from Stone. What happened to her snowflake?

"Here we are then," the lady says. "Don't forget your suitcase." They walk into a big restaurant with orange booths along the wall and tiny Christmas trees on the tables. The waitresses wear brown dresses with white aprons and little half-circle hats that look like miniature spaceships crashed into all their heads. A woman is standing in one of the booths, waving and calling Rachel's name. The lady walks toward her. Rachel follows.

The woman wraps her arms around Rachel. She smells like soap. When she lets go of Rachel, she doesn't stand up but stays at Rachel's level, staring at her. Pink lipstick is smeared above her lips so she looks a little bit like she has three lips. Her eyebrows are drawn high on her forehead, beneath curls that are a strange shade of pink and orange, and she wears poinsettia earrings. "You remember me, don't you, honey?" she says. Then she looks up at the lady and frowns. "You can go now." She pulls Rachel close; together they pivot away from the lady. "Here, let me take that." She leans over and takes Rachel's suitcase. Rachel looks over her shoulder at the lady who is already walking away. "You don't remember me, do you? It's me. Grandma."

"Where's Dad?"

The Grandma sighs. "Are you hungry?" She guides Rachel into the booth and then slides in across from her. "This has all been expensive, you know. The lawyers and everything. He's at work. But he'll be home by the time we get there. Do you want a hamburger? A chocolate shake? What did you say to those people? Okay, I promised I wouldn't talk about it.

Don't touch the little tree, Rachel, can't you just sit still for five minutes? It's just for looking."

Rachel's stomach feels funny. "Can I have an egg?"

"An egg? What kind of egg? Don't you want a hamburger?"

Rachel shakes her head. She starts to cry.

"Don't cry," the Grandma says. "It's over, all right? If you want an egg, you can have an egg. Were the people mean to you, Rachel? Did anyone hurt you?"

"Fried, please," Rachel says. "And can I have toast?"

"You can tell me, you know," the Grandma says. "Did anything happen to you while you were gone? Did anyone touch you in a bad way?"

Rachel is tired of the questions about bad touch. She is tired of grownups. Also she is cold. She just looks at the Grandma and after a while the Grandma says, "We decorated the tree last night. Your father hadn't even bought one yet. But don't worry; I set him straight about that. After everything you've been through! Well, he just wasn't thinking clearly. He's been through a lot too. Blue Spruce. It looks real nice."

The waitress comes and the Grandma orders a fried egg and toast for Rachel and the fish platter for herself. The waitress says, "Rachel?"

Miss Engstrom! Dressed as a waitress!

"Do you know each other?" the Grandma says.

"I used to be Rachel's teacher," Miss Engstrom says.

"In Boston?" asks the Grandma.

Miss Engstrom shakes her head, "No, in Stone. How are you, Rachel? Are you having a good holiday? Do you like your new teacher?"

"Wait, I know who you are. I know all about you."

"I wish you would come back," Rachel says.

"I forbid you to speak to my granddaughter, do you hear me? Where's the manager?"

Miss Engstrom's face does something strange, it sort of collapses, like an old Jack O' Lantern, but she shakes her head and everything goes back to normal. She smiles a fake smile at Rachel and walks away. The Grandma says, "She's the one who hurt you, isn't she? Where's that social worker when you need her? Why didn't you tell them about her, Rachel? Could you just tell me that?"

"Miss Engstrom never hurt me," Rachel says. "She was nice."

"Nice? She left bruises on your arms, Rachel."

Rachel sighs. She is sooo tired of stupid grownups and their stupid questions. "I told everyone," she says, "it wasn't her. It wasn't my dad, okay? It was the bones that did it."

"What bones? What are you talking about?"

But Rachel doesn't answer. She's learned a thing or two about answering adults' questions. Instead, she picks up the salt shaker and salts the table. The Grandmother grabs the shaker. "Just sit and wait for your egg," she says. "Maybe you could use this time to think about what you've done."

Rachel folds her hands neatly in front of her, just as she learned to do in Miss Engstrom's class. She is still sitting like that when Miss Engstrom returns with their order.

"You can eat now, Rachel," the Grandmother says. Rachel unfolds her hands and cuts her egg. The yellow yolk breaks open and smears across her plate. She can feel both Miss Engstrom and the Grandmother watching, but she pretends not to notice. The music is "Frosty the Snowman." Rachel eats her egg and hums along.

"Stop humming," says the Grandma, then, to Miss Engstrom, "You can go. We don't want anything else."

Miss Engstrom touches Rachel's head, softly. Rachel looks up at Miss Engstrom and sees that she is crying. Miss Engstrom nods at Rachel, one quick nod, as if they have agreed on something, then she sets the bill down on the table and walks away.

"Your father will be happy to see you," the Grandmother says. "Eat your egg. We've still got a long drive ahead of us."

Rachel's father does act happy to see her. He says, "I am so happy you are home," but he hugs her as if she is covered in mud and he doesn't want to get his clothes dirty.

The Christmas tree is already decorated. Rachel stares at it and the Grandma says, "Do you like it? We did it last night to surprise you." It is lit with tiny white lights, and oddly decorated with gold and white balls.

"Where are our ornaments?" Rachel asks.

"We decided to do something different this year," the Grandma says. "Don't you just love white and gold?"

Rachel doesn't know what to say. Clearly she is not expected to tell the truth. "Why don't you go unpack," the Grandma says, nodding at the suitcase. "Make yourself at home," she laughs.

Rachel is surprised, when she enters her bedroom, to discover that her bed is gone, replaced by two twin beds, just like at the Freemans'. One bed is covered with Rachel's old stuffed animals; they stare at her with their black eyes. She assumes this is her bed. Rachel inspects the animals and discovers that the ones she had cut open and stuffed with bones have been sewn shut, all except her white bear and he is missing. The other bed is covered with a pink lacy spread and several fat pillows. Next to it is a small table with a lamp, a glass of water, a few wadded tissues, and a stack of books.

"Surprise!" the Grandma says. "We're roomies now. Isn't this fun?"

Rachel nods. Apparently this is the right thing to do. The Grandma lifts the suitcase onto Rachel's bed. "Now, let's unpack your things and we can just forget about your little adventure and get on with our lives." The Grandma begins unpacking Rachel's suitcase, refolding the clothes before she puts them in the dresser. "Didn't anyone there help you with your clothes?" she says, frowning.

Rachel shrugs.

The Grandma closes the suitcase, clasps it shut, and puts it in the closet, right next to a set of plaid luggage. "Do you want a cookie? How about a gingerbread man? I've been baking up a storm, let me tell you."

Rachel follows the Grandma into the kitchen. Baking up a storm? she thinks. Maybe the Grandma is a witch; that would explain a lot. Her father is in the kitchen, talking on the phone, but when he sees her, he stops. He smiles at her, with the new smile of his and then he says, "She just walked into the kitchen. Can I call you back?" The Grandma is talking at the same time, something about chocolate chip eyes. Rachel's father says, "I love you too," softly, into the phone but Rachel stares at him in shock. Is he talking to her mother? Rachel knows that doesn't make sense. She's not a baby, after all, but who is he talking to?

"Here," the Grandma says, "choose."

Rachel looks down into the cookie tin the Grandma has thrust before her. Gingerbread men lie there with chocolate chip eyes and wrinkled red mouths. ("Dried cranberry," the Grandma says.) Rachel chooses the one at the top and immediately begins eating his face. Her father sits across



from her and shakes his head when the Grandma thrusts the tin toward him. "I missed you," he says.

The gingerbread man is spicy but the eyes and nose are sweet. Rachel doesn't care for the mouth but that part is gone fast enough.

"Your grandmother has been nice enough to come here to live with us."

The Grandmother sets a glass of milk down in front of Rachel. "Oh, I was ready for a change. Who needs Milwaukee?"

Rachel doesn't know what to say about any of it. She chews her gingerbread man and drinks her milk. Her father and the Grandma seem to have run out of ideas as well. They simply watch her eat. When she's finished, she yawns and the Grandmother says, "Time for bed."

Rachel looks at her father, expecting him to do something. Just because she yawned doesn't mean she's ready for bed! But her father isn't any help.

"Say good night," the Grandma says.

"Good night," says Rachel. She gets up, pushes the chair in, and rinses her glass. The Grandma follows her into the bedroom. She stays there the whole time Rachel is getting undressed. Rachel feels embarrassed but she doesn't know what else to do, so she pretends she doesn't mind the Grandma sitting on her bed talking about how much fun it's going to be to share the room. "Every night just like a slumber party," she says. After Rachel goes to the bathroom, brushes her teeth, and washes her face and hands, the Grandma tells her to kneel by her bed. The Grandma, complaining the whole time about how difficult it is, kneels down beside her.

"Lord," she says. "Please help Rachel understand right from wrong, reality from imagination, truth from lies and all that. Thank you for sending her home. Do you have anything to add? Rachel?"

Rachel can't think of anything to say. She shakes her head. The Grandma makes a lot of noise as she stands up again.

Rachel crawls into bed and the Grandma tucks the covers tight. So tight that Rachel feels like she can't breathe, then the Grandma kisses Rachel's forehead and turns out the light. Rachel waits, for a long time, for her father to come in to kiss her good night but he never does.

It is very dark when Rachel wakes up. The room is dark and there is no light shining under the door. It takes a moment for Rachel to realize why she's woken up. A soft rustling sound is coming from the closet.

"Grandma?" Rachel whispers, and then, louder, "Grandma?"

The Grandma wakes up, sputtering, "Marla? Is that you?"

"No. It's me, Rachel. Do you hear that noise?"

They listen for a while. It seems, to Rachel, a very long time and she is just starting to worry that the Grandma will think she is lying when the rustling starts again.

"We've got a mouse," the Grandma says. "Don't worry, I have a feeling Santa Claus might bring you a cat this year."

Very soon the Grandma is snoring in her bed. The rustling sound stops and then, just as Rachel is falling asleep, starts again. Rachel stares into the dark with burning eyes. It doesn't matter what the grownups do, she realizes, she's not safe anywhere.

Carefully, Rachel feels around in the dark for her bunny slippers. She picks up a shoe by mistake, and is startled by how large it is until she realizes it must belong to the Grandmother. She sets it down and picks up first one slipper, and then the other.

Her bunny slippers on, Rachel tiptoes out of the bedroom into the hallway, which is softly lit by the white glow of the Sheekles' Christmas-light reindeer. Rachel isn't sleepwalking, she is completely awake, but she feels strange, as though somehow she is both entirely awake and asleep at the same time. Rachel feels like she hears a voice calling from a great distance. But she isn't hearing it with her ears; it's more like a feeling inside, a feeling inside and outside of herself too. This doesn't make sense, Rachel knows, but this is what is happening. Maybe the grownups aren't right about anything, about what is real, or what is possible.

When she walks outside, the bitter cold hits Rachel hard. But she does not go back to her warm bed, instead she walks in the deadly dark of Stone, lit by occasional Christmas lights, and the few cars from which she hides, all the way to Old Burial Hill where the graves stand in the oddly blue snow, marking the dead who once lived there.

Rachel isn't afraid. She lies down. It is cold. Well, of course it is. She shivers, staring up at the stars, which, come to think of it, look like chips of bones. Maybe the skull she's been trapped in has been smashed open by some giant child who is, even now, searching through the pieces, hoping to find her. She closes her eyes.

"No, no. Not your bones. You've misunderstood everything."

Rachel opens her eyes. Standing before her is the old woman.

"Get up. Stamp your feet."

Rachel just lies there so the woman pulls her up.

"Are you a witch?" Rachel asks.

"Clap your hands and stamp your feet."

"Are you real?"

But the old woman is gone and Rachel's father is running toward her. "What are you doing here?" he says. "Rachel, what is happening to you?"

He wraps her tight in his arms and picks her up. One of her bunny slippers falls from her foot and lands softly on the snow-covered grave but he doesn't notice. He is running down the hill. Rachel, bouncing in his arms, watches the bunny slipper get smaller and smaller. She holds her father tight.

The Grandma is waiting for them in the kitchen where she is heating milk on the stove. She has on a flowered robe; her pinky-red hair, sparkling in the light, circles her face like a clown.

"She was in the graveyard," Rachel's father says.

The Grandma touches Rachel's bare arm with her own icy fingers. "Get a blanket. She's chilled to the bone."

Rachel's father sets her on the kitchen chair. He gently pries her fingers from around his neck. "I'll be right back," he says. "You have to let me go."

Rachel watches the doorway until he returns, carrying the white comforter from his bed. He wraps Rachel in it ("like a sausage," he used to say in happier times) then sits down with her on his lap.

Rachel's father kisses her head. She starts to feel warm. "Rachel," her father says, "never do that again. We'll visit your mother's grave in Boston more often, if that's what you want, but don't just leave in the middle of the night. Don't scare us like that."

Rachel nods. The Grandmother hands her a Santa Claus-face mug of hot chocolate, and sets another on the table in front of Rachel's father.

Rachel sips her hot chocolate, gives the Grandma a close look.

"Good, isn't it?" the Grandma says.

Rachel nods.

"Milk. That's the secret ingredient. None of that watery stuff."

The Grandmother sets the tin of gingerbread men on the table and Rachel reaches for one, teetering on her father's lap. He hands her a gingerbread man and takes one for himself.

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't fall asleep out there," the Grandma says.

Rachel swallows the gingerbread foot. "I started to but someone woke me up. I think it was that witch, Wilmot Redd. She found me and she made me stand up. She told me she didn't want my bones."

Rachel's father and the Grandmother look at each other. Rachel stops chewing and stares straight ahead, waiting to see if her father will make her get off his lap or if the Grandma will call the lady to come and take her away again.

"Rachel, Wilmot Redd was just some old lady. A fisherman's wife," Rachel's father says, gently.

The Grandma sits down at the kitchen table. She looks at Rachel so hard that Rachel finally has to look back at her. The Grandma's face is extraordinarily white and Rachel thinks it looks just a little bit like a paper snowflake.

"I think I know who it might have been," she says, "Have you ever heard of La Befana? She's an old woman. Much older than me. And scary looking. Ugly. She carries around a big old sack filled with gifts that she gives to children. A long time ago the three wise men stopped by her house to get directions to Bethlehem, to see the Christ Child, you know. And after she gave them directions they invited her along but she didn't go with them 'cause she had too much housework to do. Of course she immediately regretted being so stupid and she's been trying to catch up ever since, so she goes around giving gifts to all the children just in case one of them is the Savior she neglected to visit, all those years ago, just 'cause she had dirty laundry to take care of. I bet that's who helped you tonight. Old La Befana herself." The Grandmother turns to look at Rachel's father. "It's about time this family had some luck, right? And what could be luckier than to be part of a real live Christmas miracle?"

Rachel's father hugs her and says, "Well, this little miracle better go to bed. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, you don't want to sleep through it, do you?"

The Grandmother takes the mug of hot chocolate and the half-eaten

gingerbread man from Rachel. Her father carries her to bed, tucks her in, and kisses her forehead. Rachel is falling asleep, listening to the faint murmuring voices of her father and the Grandmother, when she hears the noise. She goes to the closet, opens it, and sees right away, the Halloween treat bag in the corner, rustling as though the mouse is trapped inside. She is just about to shut the door when the small hand reaches out of the bag, grasps the paper edge, and another hand appears, and then, a tiny, bone head.

"Is that you?" Rachel whispers.

The bones don't answer. They just come walking toward her, their sharp points squeaking.

Rachel slams the closet door shut. She runs out of her room. The Grandma and her father are sitting next to the tree. When they turn to her, their faces are flicked with yellow, blue and green, they grin the wide skeletal grin of skulls. "Honey, is something the matter?" her father asks. Rachel shakes her head. "Are you sure? You look like you've seen — "

The Grandma interrupts, "Is it the mouse? Did you see the mouse?" Rachel nods.

"Don't worry about it," the Grandma says, "Maybe Santa Claus will bring you a kitty this year."

Rachel refuses to go back to bed until her father and the Grandmother walk with her. They tuck her in, and again her father kisses her forehead, and the Grandma does the same, and then they leave her alone in the dark. After a while she hears the bones squeaking across the floor. Rachel feels around in the dark until she finds the Grandmother's big shoe. Rachel waits until she hears the squeaking start once more. When it does, she pounds where the sound comes from, and the first two times, she hits only the floor but the next five or six, she hears the breaking of bones, the small cries and curses. Her father and Grandmother run into the room and turn on the light. "Well, you killed it," the Grandma says, looking at her, strangely. "I'll go get the broom and dustpan."

Rachel's father doesn't say anything. They just stand there, looking at the mess on the floor, and then at the mess on the bottom of the Grandmother's shoe.

Later, after it's all cleaned up, Rachel crawls back into bed. She pulls the blankets to her chin, and rolls to her side. Her father and the

Grandmother stand there for a while before they walk out of the room. For a long time Rachel listens in the dark but all she hears is her own breathing, and she falls asleep to the comforting sound.

When she wakes again it is Christmas Eve and snowing outside, glistening white flakes that tumble down the sky from the snow queen's garden, the Grandma says.

Because it is a special day the Grandma lets Rachel have gingerbread cookies and hot chocolate for breakfast on the couch while her father sleeps late. "He's worn out after everything you've been through," the Grandma says. Occasionally Rachel thinks she hears mewling from her father's room but the Grandma says, "Anyone can sound like a cat. It's probably just a sound he makes in his sleep. You, for instance, last night you were singing in your sleep."

"I was?" Rachel asks.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that before? You sing in your sleep."

"I do?"

The Grandma nods. "You're a very strange little girl, you know," she says.

Rachel chews the gingerbread face and sighs.

"Now what do you suppose this is all about?"

The Grandma stands next to the Christmas tree, looking out the window. Rachel gets off the couch and squeezes between the Grandma and the tree. A gray cat meanders down the crooked sidewalk in front of the house. In its mouth it holds a limp mouse. Walking behind the cat is a straggling line of children in half-buttoned winter coats and loosely tied scarves, tiptoeing in boots and wet sneakers, not talking to each other or catching snowflakes on their tongues, only intently watching the cat with their bright eyes.

"Like the Pied Piper," the Grandma says.

Rachel shrugs and goes back to the couch. "It's just a bunch of the little kids," she says. "Who's the Pied Piper?"

The Grandma sighs. "Don't they teach you anything important these days?"

Rachel shakes her head.

"Well, it looks like I'll have to," the Grandma says.

And she does. ॐ

You remember Dazzle the dog, right? He debuted in 1988 in the British anthology *Other Edens II*, but more recently (in '99 and '02, to be precise) we published two of his capers, one involving his paternity and another concerning his adventures in animal experimentation. (Another tale, concerning his political exploits, is due to appear in the magazine *Fence*.)

Now we find the clever canine enjoying life in the ivy-covered halls of academe—but academia has its troubles, too.

Aficionados of Mr. Bradfield's animal tales should seek out *Hot Animal Love*, his most recent story collection, which contains a baker's dozen of his reports from the human/animal divide.

# Dazzle the Pundit

By Scott Bradfield

*Weh! Weh mir Unglücksel'gem!*

— Wagner's *Tannhäuser*

**F**OR A LATE-MIDDLE-AGED mutt with barely three weeks of obedience school under his collar, Dazzle was as surprised as anybody to be

awarded a Seymour Fischer Guest Professorship from the Free University in Berlin.

"As awkward as it is to admit, Herr Dazzle, you were not exactly our first choice," confessed Dr. Krantzbaum on the day he called to arrange the opening address. "But you would be surprised by how difficult it is to find a decent lecturer in Post-Humanist Studies, especially these days. When Oscar the Baboon canceled at the last minute, we found ourselves grasping at straws. We contacted internationally renowned cats, songbirds, dancing bears, penguins, gender-neutral pachyderms, and even a high-profile crow we once heard about, but they were all booked into the next decade. Then, just as we were about to give up hope, someone told us about you

— and your history of iron-jawed protest against the forces of sapien-hegemony and control. And the movie deal, *mein Gott*, that really perked our ears. Be straight with us, Herr Dazzle. Is it true about Sean Penn playing the lead in your life story? If he's not too busy, perhaps you might even arrange a guest appearance for your class."

While Dazzle had been giving the matter serious consideration for the last two weeks or so, he hadn't come close to making a decision until he heard Dr. Krantzbaum's strong, sensible voice reaching out for him through the speaker phone.

"I'm genuinely tempted," Dazzle said, sitting at his lawyer's desk in a large leather-bound swivel chair. "I really am. I've always wanted to visit foreign countries and learn about different cultures, and goodness knows I'm not getting any younger. But frankly, the idea of presenting a public lecture makes me queasy, and while I've always possessed the gift of gab, I might start feeling pretty intimidated if, you know. People actually started *listening*. What I'm trying to say is that I'd hate to be a big disappointment to you guys. Especially since you'd be putting me up in that nice apartment off the Rüdeshheimer Platz, and paying me such a hefty per diem and all."

The transatlantic connection was as crisp and clear as a cold glass of water.

"Ach, don't worry about it, old boy! How could our students be disappointed by a big friendly doggy like yourself? We are big dog lovers here in Berlin, Herr Dazzle. We love big shaggy doggies very much."

Dazzle was sitting alone in his lawyer's office, gazing up at shelves of tightly bound legal volumes which likewise seemed to be gazing down at him. You make a few bucks, Dazzle reflected, sell a few pieces of yourself, and pretty soon it gets harder and harder to escape back into the woods for any decent length of time. There's always another contract to sign, or another call to take.

"Herr Dazzle? Are you still there?"

But then some pieces of yourself are easier to sell than others.

"Yes, Doctor Krantzbaum, and one more thing. As embarrassing as it is to admit, you should know that I don't speak a word of German. This might prove something of a problem, considering I'm supposed to be giving lectures and all."



The speaker phone breathed a long, happy sigh.

"Ach, *mein doggy freunde!* Bother yourself no longer about this minor difficulty. Our students are very knowledgeable and hard-working, and their canine is quite excellent, as you will soon find out. Many of them, in fact, speak it even better than myself!"

Dazzle's reception was held in the lecture hall of the Department of Comparative Cultures, a low-ceilinged, aluminum-sided, mobile-home-like structure set among many fragrant bushes and trees.

"You should know right off that I'm not a trained scholar. Heck, when I was a pup? I barely learned how to roll over and play dead, which led to some pretty uncomfortable confrontations with my first (and only) human family, the Davenports. No, I'm what you'd call an autodidactic sort of dog, which is probably what makes me so skeptical about authority figures and so forth. Political leaders, say. Or movies, newspapers, the world-wide-web and, well, I hope this doesn't sound rude, but even highbrow academic-types such as yourselves. I simply don't believe anything I can't see, hear, taste, and sniff for my goddamn self. It's not that I think I'm better than anybody else. It's just that I never met anybody who's any better than me — if you can dig the distinction."

They were probably the best-looking group of human beings Dazzle had ever seen in his life: well dressed, well fed, and attentive. But it didn't seem right somehow. All these attractive young people sitting politely in hard foldable chairs and wasting their formidable concentration on *him*.

"I guess what I'm saying is that I believe in honest advertising, and to be totally honest? I probably don't have anything interesting to teach you guys except, of course, what it's like to be a dog in a human world. So I hope I won't be too boring, or distract you too much from the very useful work you're probably doing in your other classes. And, well, at this point I should probably ask if there are any questions and so forth. And if there aren't any questions, I can let you all go home."

Dazzle was already starting to climb down from his awkward perch on the rim of a rickety pine table when he saw a hand go up. The young woman attached to that hand was so beautiful and well-formed that she could put a dog off other dogs.

"I am Agatha Meineke, Herr Professor Dazzle, and I was wondering —"  
"Please. Just Dazzle."

She blushed. "If you don't mind my asking, what happens to dogs in America when they refuse to roll over and play dead?"

Her yips and arfs, despite a weird inflection, were almost perfect.

"Nobody feeds them," Dazzle explained simply. "Nobody loves them. They get sent to extermination camps. And if they manage to dig their way out under the fence, they spend the rest of their lives on the lam, running from one garbage can to another. If they're lucky, like me, they might make a nice life for themselves in the woods. But most of them aren't lucky. They get picked up by the Man. They get run over by cars."

Three more hands went up. Four. Five.

"Are you *sure* you are providing an accurate representation of canine life in America?" enquired a young man with a spiny Norwegian burr. "Many of us receive a different impression entirely from your highly entertaining television programs, in which dogs are profound and witty creatures adored by everyone. Billionaires leave them mansions in their will. They live like kings and queens in the lap of luxury."

It was almost sweet, Dazzle thought. Some Norwegian kid believing what he saw on American TV.

"Television," Dazzle replied simply, "only imagines what can't be believed. Otherwise, why would there be so many freaking commercials?"

"Are you claiming that in the Land of Liberty, freedom does not exist for everyone?"

"Only if you can afford it."

A buzz of reflected glances and whispers. Then, from the back of the room, another hand went up.

And signaled that the buzz was over.

"Yes. You in back."

The audience emitted a long, collective sigh. A few even rolled their eyes.

"Heinrich Mandelbrot," the young man said. He wore black from head to foot: black turtleneck, black jeans, black loafers. "Abstract philosophy."

"How's it hanging, Heinrich."

Heinrich leveled his pupil-filled gaze at Dazzle, as if aiming a rifle.

"When you label yourself an empiricist, are you referring to empiricism of the logical or moral variety? And wouldn't you say that contemporary research into the combinatory nature of public perception has proven conclusively —"

"Oh jeez, Heinrich. I don't think I can answer this."

"Please let me finish. How can you believe what you learn for yourself when you lack the intellectual, moral, or political grounds for knowing who you are to begin with? I'm speaking in a meta-linguistic framework, of course."

"Oh," Dazzle said with a slow, wise nod of his head. He felt a little woozy and out of breath. "The meta-linguistic thingy. Like how do I know I exist outside my head, or something like that?"

The entire audience subsided slowly, as if all the air were being let out of their tires.

"No, Herr Dazzle, I am merely seeking a critical self-appraisal in terms of post-Descartian discourse. I'm sure you're familiar with Habermas. I'm sure you're familiar with the Frankfurt School of Social Research."

Now Dazzle wasn't entirely unfamiliar with post-war German philosophy. As a pup, he had browsed vigorously through many books that fell in his path, and had even snuck off to a college lecture or two. But it all seemed so terribly far away, he thought now. And the idea of those well-meaning German exiles wandering the sun-struck streets of Santa Monica just made him feel lonely.

Sometimes, he thought, it's not *what* you say that matters. It's simply making the effort to say *anything* at the exact same moment when someone's waiting to hear it.

"Excuse me, Heinrich. I'm not what you'd call a systematic thinker, but perhaps I *can* answer your question. But only with another question."

It was like snapping on all the lights in a dark room — causing the audience of really attractive people to look up with an expression that Dazzle didn't often find in the faces of human beings.

Hope?

"And that question is this: Don't you think it's time you and your pals led me to some of this Weissbier and sauerkraut I've heard so much about?"

We've got all term to discuss epistemology, but after traveling fifteen hours baggage class in the bowels of a jumbo jet — hey. This little doggy is *starved*."

From that day forward, Dazzle liked to say that he had Berliners eating out of his hand. But then, nobody enjoyed an inverted metaphor more than Dazzle.

"When I saw my first canine dumping ground at the Tiergarten," Dazzle told his class during one of his typically aimless, unprepared lectures, "I couldn't believe my eyes. Unlike those dead spaces you find in the States, it wasn't carpeted over with broken bottles, hypodermics and whatnot, or located in the worst part of town. It actually had flower beds, and a little doggy water fountain, it was classic. I'm not saying you guys got it perfect here in Berlin; that's not what I'm saying at all. But compared to the States, you still have this fairly workable notion of public life. Public parks, public playgrounds, public transport, even socialized medicine — and it *works*. Whoever woulda thunk it?"

Dazzle realized that his lectures probably didn't qualify as very educational. He was simply gabbing aimlessly about whatever struck his fancy. Yet students were always thanking him for his time and patience; the prettier girls openly scratched him behind the ears and cooed sweet endearments ("What a nice big doggy!"), even during office hours with the door open; and meals at the University cafeteria were surprisingly tasty — though nobody in this far-flung and not-quite-fallen empire seemed to realize that there was such a thing as green vegetables.

It was only Heinrich, really, who reminded Dazzle that he wasn't measuring up to his role as intellectual mentor. At times, he even made him feel quite guilty about it.

"Herr Professor Dazzle! One moment of your time!"

"Please, just Dazzle. Or poochie-dog. Everybody in the States thinks they can call me poochie-dog — you might as well call me poochie-dog too."

"I'm so sorry, Herr Professor, but I was thinking about our discussion yesterday and I still don't understand. Let us imagine, as we were saying, that your doggy consciousness is a goldfish in a goldfish bowl. Is that acceptable?"

"Sure, Heinrich; whatever. But I have this problem with abstract speculation, see. Ideas about ideas about, you know, ideas."

"Now inside this goldfish bowl, everything feels cozy. Your gravel, your ceramic castle, your bubbling air filter, even your benignly puckered reflection in the mineral-streaked glass."

"I think I follow, Heinrich. Nothing but goldfish bowl. So far as the eye can see."

"But *beyond* this glass, everything is different. Space, weight, distance. It's inhabited by huge, distorted creatures. Sometimes they notice you; but most of the time, they don't."

"We're not talking ontology, are we, Heinrich? Not about knowing the world, or its reality. But simple communication, right? You speaking to me; and me speaking to you."

"There is a quite fascinating story about Goethe and Schiller, who were discussing, if I remember correctly, the difference between experience and ideas — "

"Goethe and Schiller," Dazzle said slowly. He could finally see the thronging crowds of the Metro station just ahead. Middle-aged men and women in muted primary colors; college kids in backpacks and denim. He felt himself hurrying toward it. "As much as I'm enjoying our little discussion, Heinrich, I'm afraid this is where I get off."

"*Formbewusstsein*," Heinrich enunciated harshly. "Surely not an unfamiliar concept for you, Herr Professor. You being such an internationally renowned intellectual and all."

"Form-buh-whatsit," Dazzle muttered thickly. These Germans sure like ideas, he thought. "Meet me in my office just before class, and I promise. This time I won't be late like, you know. The last couple times."

It was just about the only lie Dazzle had told anybody in years. And the funny part was? It didn't bother him at all.

"The sad fact of the matter," Doctor Krantzbaum explained over a friendly, intercollegiate lunch at Café Einstein, "is that nobody wants to swim in the goldfish bowl with poor Heinrich. He is simply too much *Sturm und Drang*, even for us Germans. He is too much *dasein-en-sich* and *fur-en-sich*, too much *unterheimlich*, too much *schadenfreude*, too much *Weltanschauung* and definitely, definitely too much Wagner. Perhaps you have not noticed, Mein Doggy, but our new Germany is a far more lighthearted and unassuming place than it once was. We have taken

the lead in the common market, and opened our collective hearts to Super Mario and *American Pie*. We have even adopted many hip expressions from you laid-back California-types, such as "go with the flow," "tell me about it," and "let's get it on." If I were to boil this cultural sea-change down to a simple analogy: today's Germany is far less Goethe and far more *Friends*. You know, as in that weekly assembly of footloose, wacky, and perpetually inter-pollinating youths who enliven our otherwise drab television programs many nights of the week." Dr. Krantzbaum leaned back and gazed at the bright, chandeliered ceiling, his voice suddenly hushed and reverent. "Now *that's* what I call a proper Isolde, Mein Doggy. The sloe-eyed, sharp-tongued one who stole Brad Pitt's heart a few years ago. She is definitely the unattainable fulfillment of all *my* trans-celestial yearnings."

Dazzle liked the Café Einstein, where they kept the long-stemmed glasses filled with fruity red wine. He liked the shiny white linen tablecloths, the gilded mirrors, the pervasive whiff of coarse-ground sausage, and the multiply reflected images of very old men accompanied by youngish, dyed-blond second wives wearing too much jewelry.

"I'm not saying that I dislike Heinrich," Dazzle explained distantly, scanning the wide hand-written menu with barely concealed bemusement. (Pork venison beef beef lamb pork pork chicken and fish.) "But he does make me feel like a charlatan. Here he is, coming to class every day with so many intense, well-prepared questions about the truth of perception, and the meaning of reality, and here I am, supposed to be his teacher, and I don't have a thing to tell him. I look at Heinrich, I look at the clock on the wall, and I simply don't know how to shut him up. Like just yesterday — what was old Heinrich on about yesterday? Something about nature's excess of sensation. According to Heinrich, nature pulses with so much raw experiential stuff that our meager animal senses can't possibly take it all on board. Heinrich calls it a 'reality-deficit disorder,' and according to Heinrich, this is why our lives continually reverberate with insufficiency and loss."

Dr. Krantzbaum was already brooding into the final sips of his Black Forest Burgundy. For one long moment, Dazzle thought the good doctor might be getting as tired of Dazzle as Dazzle was getting of Heinrich.

Finally, Doctor Krantzbaum replied softly: "Insufficiency, yes, in the

face of all our Isoldes. And now, if you do not mind, I will place my order for the pork roast and mashed potatoes with gravy, and thus distract myself from that smug grin I see before me always on that barbarian, you know. That movie star who goes by the name of Brad Pitt."



ACCORDING TO Herr Doctor Krantzbaum, Heinrich's peasant-stock Mom, a vender of homemade pottery in Tabruk, had been engaged (non-matrimonially-speaking) by Heinrich's errant Bavarian father enroute to an international hang-gliding competition on the Greek Isles, where he promptly soared from the rocky cliffs like Icarus and fell just as hard. As a result, Heinrich grew up envisioning Germany as more than a metaphoric and always-absent Fatherland; it was the fulfillment of identity toward which his overhuge heart always yearned. He grew up reading German poetry, listening to German opera on his Walkman, reading German culture pages, and replaying Fassbinder on his video until he knew every halting line of dialog and every swooping camera-fugue by heart. Eventually, he attended German schools on a DAAD fellowship, and during his third year at his dead papa's alma mater in Cologne, produced a highly regarded honor's thesis, entitled *Hegel, Kant, Marx and Adorno: When Is Too Much Not Enough?* which won him a State Arts Grant to Frankfurt, where he completed his baccalaureate at seventeen on the subject of Ossian.

Since his arrival at F.U., however, he had yet to complete a single chapter of his dissertation. But this had not prevented him from mapping out so many ambitious lifetime projects that it made his advisor's head hurt.

"I am compiling notes for a trilogy on the failure of knowledge," Heinrich breathlessly explained on their long afternoon walks to the Metro, while Dazzle just as breathlessly tried to outdistance him. "Then there is my history of Prussian Absolutism, my critique of Benjamin's radical desubjectivization of spirit, an essay on the anxiety of essay-writing and, of course, my reschematization of German philosophy since Lessing, which should encompass at least twenty book-length manuscripts and lead me to the doorstep of my self-proposed lifetime project: to chart the intellectual DNA of God through the prose and poetry of every

heterotext on the Internet. What do you think about that for a lifetime project, Herr Dazzle? I realize it may sound excessively ambitious, but as you must know by now — if there's one thing I'm not afraid of, it's excess."

Walking with Heinrich was like trying to win a race with your own obsessions. No matter how fast you thought you were going, they were always a few steps ahead — even on two feet.

"Don't you ever get lonely, Heinrich?" Dazzle asked one day when they found themselves slumped side by side on a leafy, convenient bus bench just short of the Metro. "Don't you ever feel that you're spending too many nights alone in your bed?"

"German women are afraid of commitments," Heinrich replied sulkily, nostrils flaring. "Especially when it comes to making commitments with Heinrich."

"What about TV or movies, Heinrich? Or even Nintendo? Just something, you know, to get your mind off itself."

"German TV is nothing but bourgeois propaganda about the terrible, nonsensical traumas associated with being bourgeois. And as for American TV, forget it. Dreams of plenitude, twenty-four hours a day. And as you must realize, Herr Dazzle — those aren't the sort of dreams that fool me at all."

"Then what about a good cause, Heinrich? Like working with kids, or cleaning up the environment. You can't spend your entire life being obsessed with *Liebestod*, Heinrich. Especially when you have so much trouble just getting a date."

"Heinrich has no trouble getting dates."

"Okay, second dates."

"Making love is the death of desire."

"But it clears the head, Heinrich. It keeps you from thinking too hard about things you can't change. Like, you know. Yourself."

"Heinrich refuses to turn his back on the universe which today's Germany does not wish to acknowledge. The universe of heartache, spiritual insufficiency and loss."

"Tristan and Isolde."

"Who told you about Tristan and Isolde?"

"I may be a dog, Heinrich," Dazzle explained with a sigh. "But everybody's heard of Tristan and Isolde."



When it came to unraveling the complex knot of human nature, Dazzle had limited means at his disposal. But sometimes you have to make the effort, he thought. Even when you have no idea what's going on.

"Heinrich is perfectly attractive," conceded Agatha on the afternoon Dazzle asked her into his office for an informal chat. "And he certainly boasts the sort of passionate intelligence that a girl doesn't often come across in our new, improved Germany. But at the same time, he's a really tough date, especially with all his engines running. After an endless bus ride during which he continuously talks about Hegel, you end up at some badly lit cafeteria, where the rubber-gloved staff clearly find him offensive. And every time you try to change the subject to something interesting — such as your long-unconfessed ambitions to win the Euro-Vision Song Contest, or the latest episode of *Friends* — he just scowls terribly, as if you have hurled hot pasta in his face. He begins spouting Nietzsche or Hölderlin, and raving about the mindless herds of contemporary culture. Pretty soon it's nothing but 'bourgeoisie-this' and 'bourgeoisie-that,' and he's not even looking at you anymore, or noticing how much trouble you went to with your hair. Once, I was so upset, I started crying into my bratwurst. And did he notice? No, he didn't notice at all. But in answer to your question, I could actually imagine sleeping with Heinrich, or even accompanying him in a romantic manner to your highly publicized lecture at the Cross-Humanities Institute next week. But I'm afraid I *can't* imagine doing these things until he learns how to shut his stupid mouth for more than two seconds."

Agatha was sitting with Dazzle in his office on the swaybacked, well-worn sofa, and aimlessly scratching his rump while she talked. Dazzle realized that this was probably not the sort of situation a professor should cultivate with his most attractive female student (even if it *was* Europe), but then what the hey, he thought. It helped him think.

"So what you're saying, Agatha, is that you want to be with Heinrich. But only if he stops telling you who he really is."

Agatha considered this for a moment.

"I guess that's what I *am* saying, Herr Dazzle. Does that sound superficial?"

Dazzle almost laughed.

"No, Agatha, I don't think it does. Especially when we're talking about Heinrich."

Which was when Dazzle realized that he might have something to teach his students after all.

"I think I resemble the funny, wacky, sometimes stupid-sounding one named Joey. Don't I seem like Joey to you, Herr Doktor? I certainly feel like Joey — now that I'm getting to know him, that is."

It was quite amazing, Dazzle thought, how quickly these European types could pick up a totally new language. It was like dealing with chameleons or something.

"Well, yeah, I guess so, Heinrich. Joey, right. And his hair's always slightly disarranged in a kind of attractive fashion. Just like yours."

Heinrich pulled vainly at his crumpled locks. "And he always looks so baffled when he learns something obvious that everybody else has known all along. Like one of the other friends feels inclined toward him physically. Or two of his fellow friends are having an affair. He is very naive and easily astounded. Much like I feel myself to be almost all of the time."

"Boyish vulnerability," Dazzled added, trying to help. "And innocence. Don't forget innocence, Heinrich."

They had just finished screening the first three seasons in the audiovisual Common Room, where Dazzle was enjoying his best attendance of the term. The chairs and tables were full, and many students were sitting cross-legged on the linoleum.

"Myself," piped up Ingrid, a beautiful, fair-skinned Swiss woman who hadn't uttered a single word before now, "I must confess strong feelings of similarity to the very sarcastic one with the blonde hair, though my own hair is far too curly and boring. I often aim my wicked barbs at people for no reason whatsoever, and many do not appreciate my characteristically bizarre sense of humor."

Hands were being raised by students Dazzle had never seen before. Some of them weren't even listed on his register.

"We especially enjoy their manifest looks of surprise when they awaken in each other's beds. And no matter what sort of insurmountable problems they face — such as achieving personal space in their bathrooms, or the ominous threat of really attractive non-friends trying to break into the inner circle — they still feel total devotion to one another without exception, and raise their variously engendered (and highly attractive)

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offspring in total harmony."

"Except perhaps for that English girl. We have trouble accepting that a true friend would ever marry an English girl."

"It was doomed from the start."

"She hardly makes any subsequent appearances."

"She was nowhere near so entertaining as Sean Penn."

"Which brings us to a collective point of interest, Herr Dazzle, if you wouldn't mind —"

After snoozing through the entire DVD marathon, Dazzle had awakened to a class buzzing with excited young men and women learning about one another as fast as they could. Especially Agatha and Heinrich, who were sitting so close together that they almost touched.

Dazzle even felt enough confidence to tackle the most troubling issue of the term:

"I think I know where this is going, so let me reiterate for like the thousandth time. There's nothing to those rumors about Sean Penn playing the lead in my life story. And I hate to disappoint you — but at this point in time? I doubt if Sony will even renew the option."

It was never easy for Dazzle to tell when he had turned a potentially disastrous experience into a marginally successful one, but he was pretty sure the breakthrough occurred sometime during his presentation of the Seymour Fischer Lecture, which was held at the Modern Language Institute, conveniently located just across the street from the Mitte Metro.

"First off," Dazzle began, "I want to tell you all *woof*, and say that I've had a terrific time during the last few months, *woof woof*. And just as expected, I've ended up learning more from you guys than you could ever learn from me, especially when it comes to language. For example, I've learned that you guys really take language seriously, not simply as a means of expressing yourselves (like most American mutts I know), but as a means of communicating with other cultures. You guys actually listen to other people, whatever country they're from. I guess it's the result of living on a continent with so many various languages and all, and everybody competing for the same euros and shelf-space. And so far as your canine — hey, stop apologizing! For my money, you speak it as well as any dog, right down to the guttural diphthongs. Good going!"

The large audience of well-dressed, attractive men and women smiled a collective smile.

(When in doubt, just compliment these people on their language skills, Dazzle thought happily. It's like turning on all the lights.)

"Anyway," Dazzle continued, shouldering up to the low-slung microphone, "I'll never forget my time in your country, or the things I've learned while I was here. For example, I now realize that language isn't just a pile of words in a dictionary. Language is the air we breathe, and the food we eat, and the stories we tell when we're together. Look, I know I can be pretty cynical and footsore about this crazy world, but there's one thing I've learned which gives me hope. Every effort to speak or listen is basically a good effort, so long as we keep trying. Which is, I guess, a long-winded way of saying thanks for having me. I had a terrific time. Oh—and one more thing."

The audience moved forward just a little to the edge of their chairs. Dazzle didn't think he'd ever get used to it: the posture and intensity of almost-alien human beings *listening*.

To *him*.

(What a trip, Dazzle thought.)

"*Herzlichen Dank für Ihre Wunderbare Gastfreundschaft*," Dazzle enunciated thickly, in possibly the worst German ever spoken on the face of the planet. "And now, if you don't mind, it's time for me to go." ☞

## COMING ATTRACTIONS

AS WE MOVE into the year 2007, we look to one of our favorite futurists to entertain us. Bruce Sterling comes through in fine form with "Kiosk," an excellent example of how revolution sometimes comes from unexpected sources.

Next month we also plan to bring you Neil Gaiman's "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," a fine new story from the author of *Anansi Boys* and *Neverwhere*.

Our inventory runneth over with fine new tales from M. K. Hobson, Alexander Jablokov, Marta Randall, and William Browning Spencer, to name but a few. Do your holiday shopping at [www.fsfmag.com](http://www.fsfmag.com) and your friends will thank you throughout the year.

*The noösphere posited by Matthew Hughes is a grand form of a collective unconscious. We here at F&SF sometimes feel our magazine is a similar sort of thing—an amalgamation of the dreams and nightmares of a small portion of the humans occupying this planet.*

*The nightmares we receive say a bit about the anxieties and fears dogging people nowadays. Consider, for instance, this speculation...*

*Daryl Gregory lives in State College, Pennsylvania with his family. He has published several stories in our pages, including "The Continuing Adventures of Rocket Boy" and "Gardening at Night." He's currently finishing up a novel entitled Pandemonium.*

# Damascus

*By Daryl Gregory*

I.

W

HEN PAULA BECAME conscious of her surroundings again, the first thing she sensed was his fingers entwined in hers.

She was strapped to the ambulance backboard — each wrist cuffed in nylon, her chest held down by a wide band — to stop her from flailing and yanking out the IV. Only his presence kept her from screaming. He gazed down at her, dirty-blond hair hanging over blue eyes, pale cheeks shadowed by a few days' stubble. His love for her radiated like cool air from a block of ice.

When they reached the hospital, he walked beside the gurney, his hand on her shoulder, as the paramedics wheeled her into the ER. Paula had never worked in the ER, but she recognized a few of the faces as she passed. She took several deep breaths, her chest tight against the nylon strap, and calmly told the paramedics that she was fine, they could let her go now. They made reassuring noises and left the restraints in place. Untying her was the doctor's call now.

Eventually an RN came to ask her questions. A deeply tanned, heavy-set woman with frosted hair. Paula couldn't remember her name, though they'd worked together for several years, back before the hospital had fired Paula. Now she was back as a patient.

"And what happened tonight, Paula?" the nurse said, her tone cold. They hadn't gotten along when they worked together; Paula had a temper in those days.

"I guess I got a bit dizzy," she said.

"Seizure," said one of the paramedics. "Red Cross guy said she started shaking on the table, they had to get her onto the floor before she fell off. She'd been seizing for five or six minutes before we got there so we brought her in. We gave her point-one of Lorazepam and she came out of it during the ride."

"She's the second epileptic this shift," the nurse said to them.

Paula blinked in surprise. Had one of the yellow house women been brought in? Or one of the converts? She looked to her side, and her companion gazed back at her, amused, but not giving anything away. Everything was part of the plan, but he wouldn't tell her what the plan was. Not yet.

The nurse saw Paula's shift in attention and her expression hardened. "Let's have you talk to a doctor, Paula."

"I'm feeling a lot better," Paula said. Didn't even grit her teeth.

They released the straps and transferred her to a bed in an exam room. One of the paramedics set her handbag on the bedside table. "Good luck now," he said.

She glanced at the bag and quickly looked away. Best not to draw attention to it. "I'm sorry if I was any trouble," she said.

The nurse handed her a clipboard of forms. "I don't suppose I have to explain these to you," she said. Then: "Is there something wrong with your hand?"

Paula looked down at her balled fist. She concentrated on loosening her fingers, but they refused to unclench. That had been happening more often lately. Always the left hand. "I guess I'm nervous."

The nurse slowly nodded, not buying it. She made sure Paula could hold the clipboard and write, then left her.

But not alone. He slouched in a bedside chair, legs stretched in front



of him, the soles of his bare feet almost black. His shy smile was like a promise. I'm here, Paula. I'll always be here for you.

## II.

Richard's favorite album was Nirvana's *In Utero*. She destroyed that CD first.

He'd moved out on a Friday, filed for divorce on the following Monday. He wanted custody of their daughter. Claire was ten then, a sullen and secretive child, but Paula would sooner burn the house down around them than let him have her. Instead she torched what he loved most. On the day Paula got the letter about the custody hearing, she pulled his CDs and LPs and DATs from the shelves—hundreds of them, an entire wall of the living room, and more in the basement. She carried them to the backyard by the box. Claire wailed in protest, tried to hide some of the cases, and eventually Paula had to lock the girl in her room.

In the yard Paula emptied a can of lighter fluid over the pile, went into the garage for the gas can, splashed that on as well. She tossed the Nirvana CD on top.

The pile of plastic went up in a satisfying *whoosh*. After a few minutes the fire started to die down—the CDs wouldn't stay lit—so she went back into the house and brought out his books and music magazines.

The pillar of smoke guided the police to her house. They told her it was illegal to burn garbage in the city. Paula laughed. "Damn right it's garbage." She wasn't going to be pushed around by a couple of cops. Neighbors came out to watch. Fuck them, she thought.

She lived in a neighborhood of Philadelphia that outsiders called "mixed." Blacks and Latinos and whites, a handful of Asians and Arabs. Newly renovated homes with Mexican tile patios side by side with crack houses and empty lots. Paula moved there from the suburbs to be with Richard and never forgave him. Before Claire was born she made him install an alarm system and set bars across the windows. She felt like they were barely holding on against a tide of criminals and crazies.

The yellow house women may have been both. They lived across the street and one lot down, in a cottage that was a near-twin of Paula's. Same fieldstone porch and peaked roofs, same narrow windows. But while

Paula's house was painted a tasteful slate blue, theirs blazed lemon yellow, the doors and window frames and gutters turned out in garish oranges and brilliant whites. Five or six women, a mix of races and skin tones, wandered in and out of the house at all hours. Did they have jobs? They weren't old, but half of them had trouble walking, and one of them used a cane. Paula was an RN, twelve years working all kinds of units in two different hospitals, and it looked to her like they shared some kind of neuromuscular problem, maybe early MS. Their yellow house was probably some charity shelter.

On the street the women seemed distracted, sometimes talking to themselves, until they noticed someone and smiled a bit too widely. They always greeted Paula and Richard, but they paid special attention to Claire, speaking to her in the focused way of old people and kindergarten teachers. One of them, a gaunt white woman named Steph who wore the prematurely weathered face of a long-time meth user, started stopping by more often in the months after Richard moved out. She brought homemade food: Tupperware bowls of bean soup, foil-wrapped tamales, rounds of bread. "I've been a single mom," she said. "I know how tough things can be on your own." She started babysitting Claire a couple nights a week, staying in Paula's house so Claire could fall asleep in her own bed. Some afternoons she took Claire with her on trips to the grocery or the park. Paula kept waiting for the catch. It finally came in the form of a sermon.

"My life was screwed up," Steph said to Paula one afternoon. Claire had vanished to her bedroom to curl up with her headphones. The two women sat in the kitchen eating cheese bread someone in the yellow house had made. Steph drank wine while Paula worked her way through her afternoon Scotch. Steph talked frankly about her drug use, the shitty boyfriends, the money problems. "I was this close to cutting my wrists. If Jesus hadn't come into my life, I wouldn't be here right now."

Here we go, Paula thought. She drank silently while Steph droned on about how much easier it was to have somebody walk beside her, someone who cared. "Your own personal Jesus," Steph said. "Just like the song."

Paula knew the song — Richard loved that '80s crap. He even had the Johnny Cash remake, until she'd turned his collection to slag. "No thanks," Paula said, "I don't need any more men in my life."

Steph didn't take offense. She kept coming back, kept talking. Paula

put up with the woman because with Richard out of the house she needed help with Claire — and because she needed her alone time more than ever. The yellow house women may have been Jesus freaks, but they were harmless. That's what she told herself, anyway, until the night she came home to find Claire gone.

### III.

Paula knew how to play the hospital game. Say as little as possible, act normal, don't look at things no one else could see. She knew her blood tests would come out normal. They'd shrug and check her out by noon.

Her doctor surprised her, though. They'd assigned her to Loudon, a short, trim man with a head shaved down to gray stubble who had a reputation among the nurses for adequacy: not brilliant, but not arrogant either, a competent guy who pushed the patients through on schedule. But something had gotten into him — he was way too interested in her case. He filled her afternoon with expensive MRIs, fMRIs, and PET scans. He brought in specialists.

Four of them, two neurologists and a psychiatrist she recognized, and one woman she didn't know who said she was an epidemiologist. They came in one at a time over the afternoon, asking the same questions. How long had she experienced the seizures? What did they feel like when they struck? Did she know others with these symptoms? They poked her skin to test nerve response, pulled and flexed the fingers of her clenched hand. Several times they asked her, "Do you see people who aren't there?"

She almost laughed. He sat beside her the entire time, his arm cool against her own. Could anyone be more present?

The only questions that unsettled her came from the epidemiologist, the doctor she didn't recognize. "Do you eat meat?" the doctor asked. Paula said sure. And the doctor, a square-faced woman with short brown hair, asked a dozen follow-up questions, writing down exactly what kinds of meat she ate, how often, whether she cooked it herself or ate out.

At the end of the day they moved Paula into a room with a middle-aged white woman named Esther Wynne, a true southern lady who'd put on makeup and sprayed her hair as though at any moment she'd pop those IV tubes from her arms and head out to a nice restaurant.

Doctor Louden stopped by once more before going home that night. He sat heavily beside Paula's bed, ran a hand over his gray scalp. "You haven't been completely open with us," he said. He seemed as tired as she was.

"No, probably not," she said. Behind him, her companion shook his head, laughing silently.

Louden smiled as well, but fleetingly. "You have to realize how serious this is. You're the tenth person we've seen with symptoms like yours, and there are more showing up in hospitals around the city. Some of my colleagues think we may be seeing the start of an epidemic. We need your help to find out if that's the case."

"Am I contagious?"

He scratched his chin, looked down. "We don't think so. You don't have a temperature, any signs of inflammation — no signs that this is a virus or a bacterial infection."

"Then what is it you think I have?"

"We don't have a firm idea yet," he said. He was holding back, treating her like a dumb patient. "We *can* treat your symptoms though. We'll try to find out more tomorrow, but we think you have a form of temporal lobe epilepsy. There are parts of your brain that —"

"I know what epilepsy is."

"Yes, but TLE is a bit...." He gestured vaguely, then took several stapled pages from his clipboard and handed them to her. "I've brought some literature. The more you understand what's happening, the better we'll work together." He didn't sound like he believed that.

Paula glanced at the pages. Printouts from a web site.

"Read it over and tomorrow you and I can — oh, good." A nurse had entered the room with a plastic cup in her hand; the meds had arrived. Louden seemed relieved to have something else to talk about. "This is Topamax, an epilepsy drug."

"I don't want it," she said. She was done with drugs and alcohol.

"I wouldn't prescribe this if it wasn't necessary," Louden said. His doctor voice. "We want to avoid the spikes in activity that cause seizures like today's. You don't want to fall over and crack your skull open, do you?" This clumsy attempt at manipulation would have made the old Paula furious.

Her companion shrugged. It didn't matter. All part of the plan.

Paula accepted the cup from the nurse, downed the two pills with a sip of water. "When can I go home?" she said.

Louden stood up. "I'll talk to you again in the morning. I hate to tell you this, but there are a few more tests we have to run."

Or maybe they were keeping her here because they did think she was contagious. The start of an epidemic, he'd said.

Paula nodded understandingly and Louden seemed relieved. As he reached the door Paula said, "Why did that one doctor — Gerrhardt? — ask me if I ate meat?"

He turned. "Dr. Gerrholtz. She's not with the hospital."

"Who's she with then?"

"Oh, the CDC," he said casually. As if the Centers for Disease Control dropped by all the time. "Don't worry, it's their job to ask strange questions. We'll have you out of here as soon as we can."

#### IV.

Paula came home from work to find the door unchained and the lights on. It was only 7:15, but in early November that meant it had been dark for more than hour. Paula stormed through the house looking for Claire. The girl knew the rules: come home from school, lock the door, and don't pick up the phone unless caller-ID showed Paula's cell or work number. Richard took her, she thought. Even though he won partial custody, he wanted to take everything from her.

Finally she noticed the note, in a cleared space on the counter between a stack of dishes and an open cereal box. The handwriting was Steph's.

Paula marched to the yellow house and knocked hard. Steph opened the door. "It's all right," Steph said, trying to calm her down. "She's done her homework and now she's watching TV."

Paula pushed past her into a living room full of second-hand furniture and faded rugs. Every light in the house seemed to be on, making every flat surface glow: the oak floors scrubbed to a buttery sheen, the freshly painted daffodil walls, the windows reflecting bright lozenges of white. Something spiced and delicious fried in the kitchen,

and Paula was suddenly famished. She hadn't eaten anything solid since breakfast.

Claire sat on a braided oval rug, her purple backpack beside her. A nature show played on the small boxy TV but the girl wasn't really watching. She had her earphones in, listening to the CD player in her lap. Lying on the couch behind her was a thin black woman in her fifties or sixties.

"Claire," Paula said. The girl pretended to not hear. "Claire, take off your headphones when I'm talking to you." Her voice firm but reasonable. The Good Mother. "You know you're not supposed to leave the house."

Claire didn't move.

"The police were at the green house," Steph said. A rundown place two doors down from Paula with motorcycles always in the front yard. Drug dealers, Paula thought. "I went over to check on Claire, and she seemed nervous, so I invited her over. I told her it would be all right."

"You wouldn't answer your phone," Claire said without looking away from the TV. She still hadn't taken off the headphones. Acting up in front of the women, thinking Paula wouldn't discipline her in public.

"Then you keep calling," Paula said. She'd forgotten to turn on her phone when she left the hospital. She'd stopped off for a drink, not more than thirty, forty-five minutes, then came home, no later than she'd come home dozens of times in the past. "You don't leave the house."

Steph touched Paula's elbow, interrupting again. She nodded at the woman on the couch. "This is Merilee."

The couch looked like the woman's permanent home. On the short table next to her head was a half-empty water glass, a Kleenex box, a mound of damp tissue. A plastic bucket sat on the floor. Merilee lay propped up on pillows, her body half covered by a white sheet. Her legs were bent under her in what looked like a painful position, and her left arm curled up almost to her chin, where her hand trembled like a nervous animal. She watched the TV screen with a blissed-out smile, as if this was the best show in the world.

Steph touched the woman's shoulder, and she looked up. "Merilee, this is Paula."

Merilee reached up with her good right arm. Her aim was off; first she held it out to a point too far right, then swung it slowly around. Paula lightly took her hand. Her skin was dry and cool.

The woman smiled and said something in another language. Paula looked to Steph, and then Merilee said, "I eat you."

"I'm sorry?" She couldn't have heard that right.

"It's a Fore greeting," Steph said, pronouncing the word *For-ay*. "Merilee's people come from the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Merilee, Paula is Claire's mother."

"Yes, yes, you're right," Merilee said. Her mouth moved more than the words required, lips constantly twisting toward a smile, distorting her speech. "What a lovely girl." It wasn't clear if she meant Claire or Paula. Then her hand slipped away like a scarf and floated to her chest. She lay back and returned her gaze to the TV, still smiling.

Paula thought, what the hell's the matter with her?

"We're about to eat," Steph said. "Sit down and join us."

"No, we'd better get going," Paula said. But there was nothing back at her house. And whatever they were cooking smelled wonderful.

"Come on," Steph said. "You always love our food." That was true. She'd eaten their meals for a month.

"I just have a few minutes," Paula said. She followed Steph into the dining room. The long, cloth-covered table almost filled the room. Ten places set, and room for a couple more. "How many of you are there?" she said.

"Seven of us live in the house," Steph said as she went into the adjoining kitchen.

"Looks like you've got room for renters."

Paula picked a chair and sat down, eyeing the tall green bottle in the middle of the table. "Is that wine?" Paula asked. She could use a drink.

"You're way ahead of me," Steph said. She came back into the room with the stems of wine glasses between her fingers, followed by an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old black girl — Tanya? Tonya? — carrying a large blue plate of rolled tortillas. Paula had met her before, pushing her toddler down the sidewalk. Outside she walked with a dragging limp, but inside it was barely discernible.

Steph poured them all wine but then remained standing. She took a breath and held it. Still no one moved. "All right then," Steph finally said, loud enough for Merilee to hear.

Tonya — pretty sure it was Tonya — took a roll and passed the plate.

Paula carefully bit into the tortilla. She tasted sour cream, a spicy salsa, chunks of tomato. The small cubes of meat were so heavily marinated that they could have been anything: pork, chicken, tofu.

Tonya and Steph looked at Paula, their expressions neutral, but she sensed they were expecting something. Paula dabbed a bit of sour cream from her lip. "It's very good," she said.

Steph smiled and raised her glass. "Welcome," she said, and Tonya echoed her. Paula returned the salute and drank. The wine tasted more like brandy, thick and too sweet. Tonya nodded at her, said something under her breath. Steph said something to Merilee in that other language. Steph's eyes, Paula noted with alarm, were wet with tears.

"What is it?" Paula said. She put down the cup. Something had happened that she didn't understand. She stared at the pure white tortillas, the glasses of dark wine. This wasn't a *snack*, it was fucking communion.

"Tell me what's going on," she said coldly.

Steph sighed, her smile bittersweet. "We've been worried about you. Both of you. Claire's been spending so much time alone, and you're obviously still grieving."

Paula stared at her. These sanctimonious bitches. What was this, some kind of religious intervention? "My life is none of your business."

"Claire told me that you've been talking about killing yourself."

Paula scraped her chair back from the table and stood up, her heart racing. Tonya looked at her with concern. So smug. "Claire told you that?" Paula said. "And you believed her?"

"Paula...."

She wheeled away from the table, heading for the living room, Steph close behind. "Claire," Paula said. Not yelling. Not yet. "We're going."

Claire didn't get up. She looked at Steph, as if for permission. This infuriated Paula more than anything that had happened so far.

She grabbed Claire by her arm, yanked her to her feet. The headphones popped from her ears, spilling tinny music. Claire didn't even squeak.

Steph said, "We care about you two, Paula. We had to take steps. You won't understand that right now, but soon...."

Paula spun and slapped the woman hard across the mouth, turning her chin with the blow. Steph's eyes squeezed shut in pain, but she didn't raise her arms, didn't step back.



"Don't you ever come near my daughter again," Paula said. She strode toward the front door, Claire scrambling to stay on her feet next to her. Paula yanked open the door and pushed the girl out first. Her daughter still hadn't made a sound.

Behind her, Steph said, "Wait." She came to the door holding out Claire's backpack and CD player. "Some day you'll understand," Steph said. "Jesus is coming soon."

## V.

"You're a Christian, aren't you?" Esther Wynne said. "I knew from your face. You've got the love of Jesus in you."

As the two women picked at their breakfast trays, Esther told Paula about her life. "A lot of people with my cancer die quick as a wink," she said. "I've had time to say good-bye to everyone." Her cancer was in remission but now she was here fighting a severe bladder infection. They'd hooked her to an IV full of antibiotics the day before. "How about you?" Esther said. "What's a young thing like you doing here?"

Paula laughed. She was thirty-six. "They think I have a TLA." Esther frowned. "Three-letter acronym."

"Oh, I've got a couple of those myself!"

One of the web pages Dr. Loudon gave her last night included a cartoon cross-section of a brain. Arrows pointed out interesting bits of the temporal lobe with tour guide comments like "the amygdala tags events with emotion and significance" and "the hippocampus labels inputs as internal or external." A colored text box listed a wide range of possible TLE symptoms: euphoria, a sense of personal destiny, religiosity...

And a sense of presence.

*Asymmetrical temporal lobe hyperactivity separates the sense of self into two — one twin in each hemisphere. The dominant (usually left) hemisphere interprets the other part of the self as an "other" lurking outside. The otherness is then colored by which hemisphere is most active.*

Paula looked up then, her chest tight. Her companion had been leaning against the wall, watching her read. At her frightened expression he dropped his head and laughed silently, his hair swinging in front of his face.

Of course. There was nothing she could learn that could hurt her, or him.

She tossed aside the pages. If her companion hadn't been with her she might have worried all night about the information, but he helped her think it through. The article had it backward, confusing an *effect* for the *cause*. Of course the brain reacted when you sensed the presence of God. Neurons fired like pupils contracting against a bright light.

"Paula?" someone said. "Paula."

She blinked. An LPN stood by the bed with a plastic med cup. Her breakfast tray was gone. How long had she been ruminating? "Sorry, I was lost in thought there."

The nurse handed Paula the Topamax and watched as she took them. After the required ritual — pulse, blood pressure, temperature — she finally left.

Esther said, "So what were you thinking about?"

Paula lay back on the pillows and let her eyes close. Her companion sat beside her on the bed, massaging the muscles of her left arm, loosening her cramped fingers. "I was thinking that when God calls you don't worry about how he got your number," she said. "You just pick up the receiver."

"A-men," Esther said.

**D**R. LOUDEN STOPPED BY later that morning accompanied only by Dr. Gerrholtz, the epidemiologist from the CDC. Maybe the other specialists had already grown bored with her case. "We have you scheduled for another PET scan this morning," Loudén said. He looked like he hadn't slept at all last night, poor guy. "Is there anyone you'd like to call to be with you? A family member?"

"No thank you," Paula said. "I don't want to bother them."

"I really think you should consider it."

"Don't worry, Dr. Loudén." She wanted to pat his arm, but that would probably embarrass him in front of Dr. Gerrholtz. "I'm perfectly fine."

Louden rubbed a hand across his skull. After a long moment he said, "Aren't you curious about why we ordered a PET scan?" Dr. Gerrholtz gave him a hard look.

Paula shrugged. "Okay, why did you?"

Louden shook his head, disappointed again that she wasn't more concerned. Dr. Gerrholtz said, "You're a professional, Paula, so we're going to be straight with you."

"I appreciate that."

"We're looking for amyloid plaques. Do you know what those are?" Paula shook her head and Gerrholtz said, "Some types of proteins weave into amyloid fibers, forming a plaque that kills cells. Alzheimer patients get them, but they're also caused by another family of diseases. We think those plaques are causing your seizures, and other symptoms."

*Other symptoms.* Her companion leaned against her shoulder, his hand entwined in hers. "Okay," Paula said.

Louden stood up, obviously upset. "We'll talk to you after the test. Dr. Gerrholtz?"

The CDC doctor ignored him. "We've been going through the records, Paula, looking for people who've reported symptoms like yours." She said it like a warning. "In the past three months we've found almost a dozen — and that's just at this hospital. We don't know yet how many we'll find across the city, or the country. If you have any information that will help us track down what's happening, you need to offer it."

"Of course," Paula said.

Gerrholtz's eyes narrowed. She seemed ready to say something else — accuse her, perhaps — but then shook her head and stalked from the room.

Esther watched her go. After a minute of silence, the woman said, "Don't you worry, honey. It's not the doctors who are in charge here."

"Oh I'm not worried," Paula said. And she wasn't. Gerrholtz obviously distrusted her — maybe even suspected the nature of Paula's mission — but what could that matter? Everything was part of the plan, even Dr. Gerrholtz.

By noon they still hadn't come to get her for the scan. Paula drifted in and out of sleep. Twice she awoke with a start, sure that her companion had left the room. But each time he appeared after a few seconds, stepping out from a corner of her vision.

The orderly came by just as the lunch trays arrived, but that was okay, Paula wasn't hungry. She got into the wheelchair and the orderly rolled her down the hall to the elevators. Her companion walked just behind them, his dusty feet scuffing along.

The orderly parked her in the hall outside radiology, next to three other abandoned patients: a gray-faced old man asleep in his chair; a Hispanic teenager with a cast on her leg playing some electronic game; and a round-faced white boy who was maybe twenty or twenty-one.

The boy gazed up at the ceiling tiles, a soft smile on his face. After a few minutes, Paula saw his lips moving.

"Excuse me," Paula said to him. It took several tries to get his attention. "Have you ever visited a yellow house?" The young man looked at her quizzically. "A house that was all yellow, inside and out."

He shook his head. "Sorry."

None of the women still at the yellow house would have tried to save a man, but she had to ask. The boy had to be one of the converts, someone Paula's mission had saved.

"Can I ask you one more question?" Paula said, dropping her voice slightly. The old man slept on, and the girl still seemed engrossed in her game. "Who is it that you're talking to?"

The boy glanced up, laughed quietly. "Oh, nobody," he said.

"You can tell me," Paula said. She leaned closer. "I have a companion of my own."

His eyes widened. "You have a ghost following you too?"

"Ghost? No, it's not a —"

"My mother died giving birth to me," he said. "But now she's *here*."

Paula touched the boy's arm. "You don't understand what's happened to you, do you?" He hadn't come by way of the yellow house, hadn't met any of the sisters, hadn't received any instruction. Of course he'd tried to make sense of his companion any way he could. "You're not seeing a ghost. You're seeing Jesus himself."

The boy laughed loudly, and the teenage girl looked up from her game. "I think I'd know the difference between Jesus and my own mother," the young man said.

"Maybe that's why he took this form for you," Paula said. "He appears

differently for each person. For you, your mother is a figure of unconditional love. A person who sacrificed for you."

"Okay," the young man said. He tilted his head, indicating an empty space to Paula's right. "So what does yours look like?"

## VI.

God came through the windshield on a shotgun blast of light. Blinded, Paula cried out and jammed on the brakes. The little Nissan SUV bucked and fishtailed, sending the CDs piled on the seat next to her clattering onto the floorboards.

White. She could see nothing but white.

She'd stopped in heavy traffic on a four-lane road, the shopping center just ahead on her right. She'd been heading for the dumpsters behind the Wal-Mart to dispose of those CDs once and for all.

Brakes shrieked behind her. Paula ducked automatically, clenched against the pending impact, eyes screwed shut. (Still: Light. Light.) A thunderclap of metal on metal and the SUV rocked forward. She jerked in her seatbelt.

Paula opened her eyes and light scraped her retinas. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks.

She clawed blindly at her seatbelt buckle, hands shaking, and finally found the button and yanked the straps away. She scrambled over the shifter to the passenger seat, the plastic CD cases snapping and sliding under her knees and palms.

She'd found them deep in Claire's closet. The girl was away at her father's for the mandated fifty percent of the month, and Paula had found the stacked CDs hidden under a pile of blankets and stuffed animals. Many of the cases were cracked and warped by heat and most CDs had no cases at all. The day after the bonfire, Paula had caught the girl poking through the mound of plastic and damp ashes and told her not to touch them. Claire had deliberately disobeyed, sneaking out to rescue them sometime before the garbage men took the pile away. The deception had gone on for months. All the time Paula thought Claire was listening to her own music — crap by bubble-gum pop stars and American Idols — her headphones were full of her father's music: Talking Heads, Depeche Mode, Pearl Jam, Nirvana.

Paula pushed open the passenger door and half fell out the door, into the icy March wind. She got her feet under her, stumbled away from the light, into the light. Her shins struck something — the guard rail? — and she put out a hand to stop from pitching over. Cold metal bit her palms. Far to her right, someone shouted angrily. The blare and roar of traffic surrounded her.

Paula dropped to her knees and slush instantly soaked her jeans. She covered her head with both arms. The light struck her neck and back like a rain of sharpened stones.

The light would destroy her. Exactly as she deserved.

Something touched the top of her head, and she shuddered in fear and shame and a rising ecstasy that had nothing to do with sex. She began to shake, to weep.

*I'm sorry, she said, perhaps out loud. I'm sorry.*

Someone stood beside her. She turned her head, and he appeared out of the light. No — *in* the light, *of* the light. A fire in the shape of a man.

She didn't know him, but she recognized him.

He looked down at her, electric blue eyes through white bangs, his shy smile for her only. He looked like Kurt Cobain.

## VII.

"I'm not taking the meds anymore," Paula said. She tried to keep her voice steady. Louden stood beside the bed, Gerrholtz behind him holding a portfolio in her hands as big as the Ten Commandments. They'd walked past Esther without saying a word.

Her companion lay on the floor beside her bed, curled into a ball. He seemed to be dissolving at the edges, dissipating into fog. He'd lain there all morning, barely moving, not even looking at her.

"That's not a good idea," Dr. Louden said. He pulled a chair next to the bed, scraping through her companion as if he wasn't there. Paula grimaced, the old rage flaring up. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

"I'm *telling* you to stop the drugs," she said. "Unless I'm a prisoner here you can't give me medicine that I refuse."

Louden exhaled tiredly. "This isn't like you, Paula," he said.

"Then you don't know me very well."

He leaned forward, resting elbows on knees, and pressed the fingers of one hand into his forehead. More TLE patients were rolling in every day. The nurses murmured about epidemics. Poor Dr. Adequate had been drafted into a war he didn't understand and wasn't prepared for.

"Help me then," he said without looking up. "Tell me what you're experiencing."

Paula stared at the TV hanging from the ceiling. She left it on all the time now, sound off. The images distracted her, kept her from thinking of him on the floor beside her, fading.

Gerrholtz said, "Why don't I take a guess? You're having trouble seeing your imaginary friend."

Paula snapped her head toward the woman. *You bitch.* She almost said it aloud.

Gerrholtz regarded her coolly. "A woman died two days ago in a hospital not far from here," she said. "Her name was Stephanie Wozniak. I'm told she was a neighbor of yours."

*Steph is dead?* She couldn't process the thought.

Gerrholtz took the sheets from her portfolio and laid them on Paula's lap. "I want you to look at these."

Paula picked them up automatically. The photographs looked like microscope slides from her old biochem classes, a field of cells tinged brown by some preserving chemical. Spidery black asterisks pock-marked the cells.

"Those clumps of black are bundles of prions," Gerrholtz said. "Regular old proteins, with one difference — they're the wrong shape."

Paula didn't look up. She flipped the printouts one by one, her hand moving on its own. Some of the pictures consisted almost entirely of sprawling nests of black threads. Steph deserved better than this. She'd waited her whole life for a Fore funeral. Instead the doctors cut her up and photographed the remains.

"I need you to concentrate, Paula. One protein bent or looped in the wrong way isn't a problem. But once they're in the brain, you get a conformational cascade — a snowball effect."

Paula's hands continued to move but she'd stopped seeing them. Gerrholtz rattled on and on about nucleation and crystallization. She kept using the word *spongiform* as if it would frighten her.

Paula already knew all this, and more. She let the doctor talk. Above Gerrholtz's head the TV showed a concerned young woman with a microphone, police cars and ambulances in the background.

"Paula!"

Dr. Gerrholtz's face was rigid with anger. Paula wondered if that was what she used to look like when she fought with Richard or screamed at Claire.

"I noticed you avoided saying 'Mad Cow,'" Paula said. "And Kuru."

"You know about Kuru?" Louden said.

"Of course she does," Gerrholtz said. "She's done her homework." The doctor put her hands on the foot of Paula's bed and leaned forward. "The disease that killed Stephanie doesn't have a name yet, Paula. We think it's a Kuru variant, the same prion with an extra kink. And we know that we can't save the people who already have it. Their prions will keep converting other proteins to use their shape. You understand what this means, don't you Paula?"

Still trying to scare her. As if the promise of her own death would break her faith.

On the screen, the reporter gestured at two uniformed officers sealing the front door with yellow tape that looked specially chosen to match the house. Paula wondered if they'd found Merilee yet.

"It means that God is an idea," Paula said. "An idea that can't be killed."

## VIII.

The house shimmered in her vision, calling her like a lighthouse; she understood now why they'd painted it so brightly. Minutes after the accident her vision darkened like smoked glass, and now only the brightest things drew her attention. Her companion guided her down the dark streets, walking a few feet in front of her, surrounded by a nimbus of fire.

Steph opened the door. When she saw the tears in her eyes Steph squealed in delight and pulled her into a hug. "We've been waiting for you," she said. "We've been waiting so long." And then Steph was crying too.



"I'm sorry," Paula said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know...."

The other women came to her one by one, hugging her, caressing her cheeks, all of them crying. Only Merilee couldn't get up to greet her. The woman lay on the same couch as four months ago, but her limbs had cinched tighter, arms and legs curled to her torso like a dying bug. Paula kneeled next to her couch and gently pressed her cheek to Merilee's. Paula spoke the Fore greeting: *I eat you*.

That was the day one life ended and another began.

Her vision slowly returned over the next few days, but her companion remained, becoming more solid every day. They told her she didn't have to worry about him leaving her. She called in sick to work and spent most of the next week in the yellow house, one minute laughing, the next crying, sometimes both at the same time. She couldn't stop talking about her experience on the road, or the way her companion could make her recognize her vanity or spite with just a faint smile.

Her old life had become something that belonged to a stranger. Paula thought of the blank weekends of Scotch and Vicodin, the screaming matches with Richard. Had she really burned his record collection?

When she called him, the first thing she said was, "I'm sorry."

"What is it, Paula." His voice flat, wary. The Paula he knew only used "sorry" to bat away his words, deflect any attack.

"Something wonderful's happened," she said. She told him about Steph and the women of the house, then skipped the communion to tell him about the accident and the blinding light and the emotions that flooded through her. Richard kept telling her to slow down, stop stumbling over her words. Then she told him about her companion.

"Who did you meet?" he said. He thought it was someone who'd witnessed the accident. Again she tried to explain.

Richard said, "I don't think Claire should come back there this weekend."

"What? No!" She needed to see Claire. She needed to apologize to her, promise her she'd do better. She gripped the receiver. Why couldn't Richard believe her? Why was he fighting her again?

She felt a touch on the back of her head. She turned, let her hand fall to the side. His blue eyes gazed into hers.

One eyebrow rose slightly.

She breathed. Breathed again. Richard called her name from the handset.

"I know this is a lot to adjust to," Paula said. The words came to her even though her companion didn't make a sound. "I know you want the best for Claire. You're a good father." The words hurt because they were true. She'd always thought of Richard as a weak man, but if that had once been true, Claire's birth had given him someone weaker to protect. As their daughter became older he took her side against Paula more and more often. The fights worsened, but she broke him every time. She never thought he'd have the guts to walk out on her and try to take Claire with him. "If you think she'd be better off with you for a while, we can try that." She'd win his trust soon enough.

In the weeks after, Claire stayed with Richard, and Paula did hardly anything but talk with the yellow house women. At work the head nurse reprimanded her for her absences but she didn't care. Her life was with the women now, and her house became almost an annex to theirs. "We have room for more," Paula said dozens of times. "We have to tell others. It's not right to keep this to ourselves when so many people are suffering." The women nodded in agreement — or perhaps only in sympathy. Each of them had been saved, most of them from lives much worse than Paula's. They knew what changes were possible.

"You have to be patient," Steph told her one day. "This gift is handed from woman to woman, from Merilee's grandmother down to us. It comes with a responsibility to protect the host. We have to choose carefully — we can't share it with everyone."

"Why *not*?" Paula said. "Most of us would be dead without it. We're talking about saving the world here."

"Yes. One person at a time."

"But people are dying right now," Paula said. "There has to be a way to take this beyond the house."

"Let me show you something," Steph said. She brought down a box from a high bookshelf and lifted out a huge family bible. Steph opened it to the family tree page, her left hand trembling. "Here are some of your sisters," she said. "The ones I've known anyway."

The page was full of names. The list continued on the next page, and the next. Over a hundred names.

"How long has this been going on?" Paula said in wonder.

"Merilee's mother came here in 1982. Some of the women lived in this house for a while, and then were sent to establish their own houses. We don't know how many of us there are now, spread around the country. None of us knows all of them." She smiled at her. "See? You're not so alone. But we have to move quietly, Paula. We have to meet in small groups, like the early Christians."

"Like terrorists," Paula said bitterly.

Steph glanced to the side, listening to her companion. "Yes," she said, nodding. And then to Paula: "Exactly. There's no terror like the fear of God."

## IX.

He woke her at three A.M. Paula blinked at him, confused. He hovered beside the bed, only half there, like a reflection in a shop window.

She forced herself awake and as her vision cleared the edges of him resolved, but he was still more vapor than solid. "What is it?" she said. He teasingly held a finger to his lips and turned toward Esther's bed. He paused, waiting for her.

Paula slipped out of the bed and moved quietly to the cabinet against the wall. The door came open with a loud clack, and she froze, waiting to see if she'd awakened her roommate. Esther's feathery snore came faint and regular.

Paula found her handbag at the bottom shelf and carried it to the window. Feeling past her wallet fat with ID cards, she pulled out the smaller vinyl case and laid it open on the sill like a butterfly.

The metal tip of the syringe reflected the light.

Paula made a fist of her left hand, flexed, tightened again. Working in the faint light, she found the vein in her arm mostly by feel and long familiarity, her fingertips brushing first over the dimpled scars near the crook of her elbow, then down half an inch. She took the syringe in her right hand and pressed into the skin. The plastic tube slowly filled.

Paula picked her way through the dim room until her hand touched the IV bag hanging beside Esther's bed. The woman lay still, her lips slightly apart, snoring lightly. It would be simple to inject the blood through the IV's Y-port.

But what if it was too late for her? The host incubated for three to six months. Only if the cancer stayed in remission that long would the woman have a chance to know God. Not her invisible, unseen God. The real thing.

Paula reached for the tubing and her companion touched her arm. She lowered the syringe, confused. Why not inject her? She searched his face for a reason, but he was so hard to see.

He turned and walked through the wall. Paula opened the door and stepped into the bright hallway, and for a moment she couldn't find him in the light. He gestured for her to follow.

She followed his will-o'-the-wisp down the deserted corridor, carrying the syringe low at her side. He led her down the stairwell, and at the next floor went left, left again. At an intersection a staffer in blue scrubs passed ten feet in front of them without seeing them.

Perhaps she'd become invisible too.

He stopped before a door and looked at her. It was one of the converted rooms where doctors on call could catch some sleep. Here? she asked with her eyes. He gestured toward the door, his arm like a tendril of fog.

She gripped the handle, slowly turned. The door was unlocked. Gently, she pushed it open.

The wedge of light revealed a woman asleep on the twin bed, a thin blanket half covering her. She wore what Paula had seen her in earlier: a cream blouse gleaming in the hall light, a patterned skirt rucked above her knees, her legs dark in black hose. Her shoes waited side-by-side on the floor next to the bed, ready for her to spring back into action and save her world.

Paula looked back at the doorway. Dr. Gerrholtz? she asked him. Did he really want this awful woman to receive the host?

His faint lips pursed, the slightest of frowns, and Paula felt a rush of shame. Who was she to object? Before Steph had found her Paula had been the most miserable woman alive. Everyone deserved salvation. That was the whole point of the mission.

Dr. Gerrholtz stirred, turned her head slightly, and the light fell across her closed eyes. Paula raised the needle, moved her thumb over the plunger. No handy IV already connected. No way to do this without waking the woman up. And she'd wake up screaming.

"Hello?" Dr. Gerrholtz said. Her eyes opened, and she lifted a hand to shade her eyes.

Jesus is coming, Paula said silently, and pressed the needle into her thigh.

## X.

Paula and Tonya stooped awkwardly at the edge of the pit, clearing the sand. They dug down carefully so that their shovel blades wouldn't cut too deep, then pitched the spark-flecked sand into the dark of the yard. They worked in short sleeves, sweating despite the cold wind. With every inch they uncovered the pit grew hotter and brighter.

It was hard work, and their backs still ached from this morning when they'd dug the pit, hauled over the big stones, and lined the bottom with them. But Paula had volunteered for this job. She wanted to prove that she could work harder than anyone.

Inside the house, women laughed and told stories, their voices carrying through the half-opened windows. Paula tossed aside a shovelful of sand and said, "Tonya, have you ever asked why no men are invited?" She'd thought about her words for a long time. She wanted to test them on Tonya first, because she was young and seemed more open than the other women.

Tonya looked up briefly, then dug down again with her shovel. "That's not the tradition."

"But what about Donel? Wouldn't you want this for him?" Donel was Tonya's son, only two years old. He shared a bedroom with her, but all the women took care of him.

Tonya paused, leaned against her shovel. "I...I think about that. But it's just not the way it's done. No men at the feast."

"But what if we could bring the feast to them?" Paula said. "I've been reading about Merilee's people, the disease they carried. There's more than one way to transmit the host. What if we could become missionaries some other way?"

The girl shook her head. "Merilee said that men would twist it all up, just like they did the last time."

"All the disciples were men last time. This time they're all women,

but that doesn't make it right. Think about Donel." Think about Richard.

"We better keep going," Tonya said, ending the conversation. She started digging again, and after a moment, Paula joined her. But she kept thinking of Richard. He'd become more guarded over the past few months, more protective of Claire. When her daughter turned fourteen — another of Merilee's rules — Paula would bring her to communion. But if she could also bring it to Richard, if he could experience what she'd found, they could be a family again.

Several minutes later they found the burlap by the feel under their shovels. They scraped back the sand that covered the sack, then bent and heaved it up onto a pallet of plywood and one-by-fours. After they'd caught their breath they called the others from the house.

More than seventy women had come, some of them from as far away as New Zealand. None of them had come alone, of course. The air was charged with a multitude of invisible presences.

Eight of the women were chosen as pall bearers. The procession moved slowly because so many of them walked with difficulty. God's presence burned the body like a candle — Merilee's early death was proof of that — but not one of them would trade Him for anything. A perfect body was for the next life.

Steph began to sing something in Merilee's language, and the others joined in, harmonizing. Some knew the words; others, like Paula, hummed along. Women cried, laughed, lifted their hands. Others walked silently, perhaps in communion with their companions.

There was an awkward moment when they had to tilt the litter to get through the back door, but then they were inside. They carried her though the kitchen — past the stacks of Tupperware, the knives and cutting boards, the coolers of dry ice — then through the dining room and into the living room. The furniture had been pushed back to the walls. They set the litter in the center of the room.

Paula gripped the stiff and salt-caked cloth — they'd soaked the body overnight — while Steph sawed the length of it with a thick-bladed knife. Steam escaped from the bag, filling the room with a heady scent of ginger and a dozen other spices.

The last of the shroud fell away and Merilee grinned up at them. Her lips had pulled away from her teeth, and the skin of her face had turned

hard and shiny. As she'd instructed, they'd packed ferns and wild herbs around her in a funeral dress of leaves.

Steph kneeled at the head of the impromptu table and the others gathered around. The oldest and most crippled were helped down to the floor; the rest stood behind them, hands on their shoulders.

Steph opened a wooden box as big as a plumber's toolbox and drew out a small knife. She laid it on a white linen napkin next to Merilee's skull and said, "Like many of you I was at the feast of Merilee's mother, and this is the story Merilee told there.

"It was the tradition of the Fore for the men and women to live apart. When a member of the tribe died, only the women and children were allowed at the feast. The men became jealous. They cursed the women, and they called the curse *kuru*, which means both 'to tremble' and 'to be afraid.' The white missionaries who visited the tribe called it the laughing sickness, because of the grimaces that twisted their faces."

As she talked she laid out other tools from the box: a filet knife, a wooden-handled fork with long silver tines, a Japanese cleaver.

"Merilee's grandmother, Yobaiotu, was a young woman when the first whites came, the doctors and government men and missionaries. One day the missionaries brought everyone out to the clearing they'd made by the river and gave everyone a piece of bread. They told them to dip it into a cup of wine and eat, and they said the words Jesus had spoken at the last supper: This is my body, this is my blood."

Steph drew out a long-handled knife and looked at it for perhaps thirty seconds, trying to control her emotions. "The moment Yobaiotu swallowed the bread, she fell down shaking, and a light filled her eyes. When she awoke, a young boy stood at her side. He held out his hand to her, and helped her to her feet. 'Lord Jesus!' Yobaiotu said, recognizing him." Steph looked up, smiled. "But of course no one else could see him. They thought she was crazy."

The women quietly laughed and nodded.

"The doctors said that the funeral feasts caused *Kuru*, and they ordered them to stop. But Yobaiotu knew the curse had been transformed in her, that the body of Christ lived in her. She taught her daughters to keep that covenant. The night Yobaiotu died they feasted in secret, as we do tonight."

Steph removed the center shelf of the box, set it aside, and reached in again. She lifted out a hacksaw with a gleaming blade. A green price tag was still stuck to the saw's blue handle.

"The body of Christ was passed from mother to daughter," Steph said. "Because of them, Christ lives in all of us. And because of Merilee, Christ will live in sisters who've not yet been found."

"Amen," the women said in unison.

Steph lifted the saw, and with her other hand gently touched the top of Merilee's skull. "This we do in remembrance of him," she said. "And Merilee."

## XI.

The screaming eventually brought Loudon to her room. "Don't make me sedate you," he began, and then flinched as she jerked toward him. The cuffs held her to the bed.

"Bring him back!" she screamed, her voice hoarse. "Bring him back now!"

Last night they'd taken her to another room, one without windows, and tied her down. Arms apart, ankles together. Then they attached the IV and upped the dosage: two parts Topamax, one part Loxapine, an anti-psychotic.

Gerrholtz they rushed to specialists in another city.

A hospital security guard took up station outside her door, and was replaced the next morning by a uniformed police officer. Detectives came to interrogate her. Her name hadn't been released to the news, they said, but it would only be a matter of time. The TV people didn't even know about Gerrholtz — they were responding to stories coming out of the yellow house investigation — but already they'd started using the word "bioterrorism." Sometime today they'd move her to a federal facility.

Minute by minute the drugs did their work and she felt him slipping from her. She thought, if I keep watch he can't disappear. By twisting her shoulders she could see a little way over the bed and make out a part of him: a shadow that indicated his blue-jeaned leg, a cluster of dots in the speckled linoleum that described the sole of a dirty foot. When the cramps in her arms and lower back became too much she'd fall back, rest for a



while, then throw herself sideways again. Each time she looked over the edge it took her longer to discern his shape. Two hours after the IV went in she couldn't find him at all.

Louden said, "What you experienced was an illusion, Paula, a phantom generated by a short-circuiting lobe of your brain. There's a doctor in Canada who can trigger these presences with a helmet and *magnetic fields*, for crying out loud. Your...*God* wasn't real. Your certainty was a symptom."

"Take me off these meds," she said, "or so help me I'll wrap this IV tube around your fucking neck."

"This is a disease, Paula. Some of you are seeing Jesus, but we've got other patients seeing demons and angels, talking to ghosts — I've got one Hindu guy who's sharing the bed with Lord Krishna."

She twisted against the cuffs, pain spiking across her shoulders. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth.

"Paula, I need you to calm down. Your husband and daughter are downstairs. They want to visit you before you leave here."

"What? No. No." They couldn't see her like this. It would confirm everything Richard ever thought about her. And Claire.... She was thirteen, a girl unfolding into a woman. The last thing she needed was to have her life distorted by this moment. By another vivid image of her mother as a raving lunatic.

"Tell them to stay away from me. The woman they knew doesn't exist anymore."

This morning the detectives had emptied her bag and splayed the driver's licenses and social security IDs like a deck of cards. How long has this been going on? they demanded. How many people are involved?

They gave her a pencil and yellow legal pad, told her to write down all the names she could remember. She stared at the tip of the pencil. An epidemiology book she'd read tried to explain crystallization by talking about how carbon could become graphite or diamond depending on how the atoms were arranged. The shapes she made on the page could doom a score of her missionaries.

She didn't know what to do. She turned to her companion but he was silent, already disintegrating.

"You're too late," she told the detectives. She snapped the pencil in

half and threw it at them, bits of malformed diamond. "Six months too late."

## XII.

They called themselves missionaries. Paula thought the name fit. They had a mission, and they would become agents of transmission.

The first and last meeting included only eighteen women. Paula had first convinced Tonya and Rosa from the yellow house, and they had widened the circle to a handful of women from houses around Philly, and from there they persuaded a few more women from New York and New Jersey. Paula had met some of them at Merilee's feast, but most were strangers. Some, like Tonya, were mothers of sons, but all of them had become convinced that it was time to take the gospel into the world.

They met at a Denny's restaurant in the western suburbs, where Steph and the other women wouldn't see them.

"The host is not a virus," Paula said. "It's not bacterial. It can't be detected or filtered out the way other diseases are, it can't be killed by antibiotics or detergents, because it's nothing but a *shape*." A piece of paper can become a sailboat or swan, she told them. A simple protein, folded and copied a million times, could bring you Kuru, or Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, or salvation.

"The body of Christ is powerful," Paula said. They knew: all of them had taken part in feasts and had been saved through them. "But there's also power in the blood." She dealt out the driver licenses, two to each woman. Rosa's old contacts had made them for fifty bucks apiece. "One of these is all you need to donate. We're working on getting more. With four IDs you can give blood twice a month."

She told them how to answer the Red Cross surveys, which iron supplements to buy, which foods they should bulk up on to avoid anemia. They talked about secrecy. Most of the other women they lived with were too bound by tradition to see that they were only half doing God's work.

Women like Steph. Paula had argued with her a dozen times over the months, but could not convince her. Paula loved Steph, and owed so much to her, but she couldn't sit idly by any longer.

"We have to donate as often as possible," Paula said. "We have to

spread the host so far and so fast that they can't stop us by rounding us up." The incubation time depended directly on the amount consumed, so the more that was in the blood supply the faster the conversions would occur. Paula's conversion had taken months. For others it might be years.

"But once they're exposed to the host the conversion *will* happen," Paula said. "It can't be stopped. One seed crystal can transform the ocean."

She could feel them with her. They could see the shape of the new world.

The women would never again meet all together like this — too dangerous — but they didn't need to. They'd already become a church within the church.

Paula hugged each of them as they left the restaurant. "Go," she told them. "Multiply."

### XIII.

The visitor seemed familiar. Paula tilted her head to see through the bars as the woman walked toward the cell. It had become too much of a bother to lift Paula out of the bed and wheel her down to the conference room, so now the visitors came to her. Doctors and lawyers, always and only doctors and lawyers. This woman, though, didn't look like either.

"Hello, Paula," she said. "It's Esther Wynne. Do you remember me?"

"Ah." The memory came back to her, those first days in the hospital. The Christian woman. Of course she'd be Paula's first voluntary visitor. "Hello, Esther." She struggled to enunciate clearly. In the year since they'd seen each other, Paula's condition had worsened. Lips and jaw and arms refused to obey her, shaking and jerking to private commands. Her arm lay curled against her chest like Merilee's. Her spine bent her nearly in half, so that she had to lie on her side. "You look — " She made a sound like a laugh, a hiccupping gasp forced from her chest by an unruly diaphragm. " — good."

The guard positioned a chair in front of the bars and the older woman sat down. Her hair was curled and sprayed. Under the makeup her skin looked healthy.

"I've been worried about you," Esther said. "Are they treating you well?"

Paula almost smiled. "As well as you can treat a mass murderer."

Some facts never escaped her. The missionaries had spread the disease to thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. But more damaging, they'd completely corrupted the blood supply. New prion filters were now on the market, but millions of gallons of blood had to be destroyed. They told her she might be ultimately responsible for the deaths of a million people.

Paula gave them every name she could remember, and the FBI tracked down all of the original eighteen, but by then the mission could go on without them. A day after the meeting in the restaurant they'd begun to recruit others, women and men Paula would never meet, whose names would never be spoken to her. The church would continue. In secret now, hunted by the FBI and the CDC and the world's governments, but growing every day. The host was passed needle by needle in private ceremonies, but increasingly on a mass scale as well. In an Ohio dairy processing plant, a man had been caught mixing his blood into the vats of milk. In Florida, police arrested a woman for injecting blood into the skulls of chickens. The economic damage was already in the trillions. The emotional toll on the public, in panic and paranoia, was incalculable.

Esther looked around at the cell. "You don't have anything in there with you. Can I bring you books? Magazines? They told me they'd allow reading material. I thought maybe —"

"I don't want anything," Paula said. She couldn't hold her head steady enough to read. She watched TV to remind herself every day of what she'd done to the world. Outside the prison, a hundred jubilant protestors had built a tent city. They sang hymns and chanted for her release, and every day a hundred counter-protestors showed up to scream threats, throw rocks, and chant for her death. Police in riot gear made daily arrests.

Esther frowned. "I thought maybe you'd like a Bible."

Now Paula laughed for real. "What are you doing here, Esther? I see that look in your eye, you think I don't recognize it?" Paula twisted, pressed herself higher on one elbow. Esther had never been infected by the host — they wouldn't have let her in here if she didn't pass the screening — but her strain of the disease was just as virulent. "Did your Jesus tell you to come here?"

"I suppose in a way he did." The woman didn't seem flustered. Paula found that annoying.

Esther said, "You don't have to go through this alone. Even here, even after all you've done, God will forgive you. He can be here for you, if you want him."

Paula stared at her. *If I want him.* She never stopped craving him. He'd carved out a place for himself, dug a warren through the cells in her brain, until he'd erased even himself. She no longer needed pharmaceuticals to suppress him. He'd left behind a jagged Christ-shaped hole, a darkness with teeth.

She wanted him more than drugs, more than alcohol, more than Richard or Claire. She thought she'd known loneliness, but the past months had taught her new depths. Nothing would feel better than to surrender to a new god, let herself be wrapped again in loving arms.

Esther stood and leaned close to the bars so that their faces were only a couple feet apart. "Paula, if you died right now, do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you'd go to heaven?" The guard told her to step back but she ignored him. She pushed one arm through the bars. "If you want to accept him, take my hand. Reach out."

"Oh, Esther, the last — " Her upper lip pulled back over her gums. " — *last* thing I want is to live forever." She fell back against the bed, tucked her working arm to her chest.

*A million people.*

There were acts beyond forgiveness. There were debts that had to be paid in person.

"Not hiding anymore," Paula said. She shook her head. "No gods, no drugs. The only thing I need to do now — "

She laughed, but it was an involuntary spasm, joyless. She waited a moment until it passed, and breathed deep. "I need to die clean."





# FILMS

KATHI MAIO

## BEAUTIFUL SLACKER, WAKE UNTO ME

**W**HO woulda thunk that Keanu Reeves would become the biggest sf and fantasy film hero going? Certainly not I. When I first noticed him, lovely lad that he was, as a member of an ensemble cast of alienated and substance-altered teens in the strange and disturbing 1986 crime drama, *The River's Edge*, I never would have predicted his affinity for far-ranging fantasy roles.

Even forgetting his central role as Neo in the *Matrix* trilogy — and I'm serious, *please* let's all try to forget it! — Reeves has done a great many sf-tinged roles in his twenty years as a reluctant movie star. From the dopey but adorable dude, Ted, in the Bill and Ted movies (1989, 1991) to the even more dopey but less adorable Jonathan Harker in Coppola's *Dracula* (1992), Reeves

has traveled time, space, and overwrought drama with the best of them. Other sf/fantasy films featuring Mr. Reeves include *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Chain Reaction* (1996), *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), *The Gift* (2000), *Constantine* (2005), and, according to how literal-minded you feel about religious myth, even 1993's *Little Buddha* (in which he played the divinity-in-the-making role of Siddhartha).

Although I defy anyone to question his physical beauty, Keanu's acting ability has been more of a matter of debate over the years. Since his screen affect is so often inscrutable — or out-and-out vacant if you're a detractor — it's not always clear whether he's delivering a performance or pondering what he should have for lunch. I've never seen any iPod wires coming from his ears, but he often has

that off-somewhere-look of a down-load-obsessed listener who can't be bothered to interact with the outer world.

Because of his idiosyncrasies as a performer, Keanu's most believable roles have been those of the disaffected or the drugged, as in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) or *I Love You to Death* (1990). His experiments with drama and romance, as in *A Walk in the Clouds* (1995), *Sweet November* (2001), or any number of the films mentioned in previous paragraphs, have been more problematic.

Which brings us to the two latest films of Keanu Reeves, both sf/fantasy, released within three weeks of one another.

The first out of the gate was the much-promoted yet little-seen romance, *The Lake House*. The movie was touted as Keanu's long-awaited reteaming with his *Speed* co-star, Sandra Bullock, but Asian film fans were more interested in it as (yet another) Hollywood remake of a Korean film; in this case, the fantasy romance, *Il Mare* (*Siwora*) directed by Lee Hyun-Seung, and starring Lee Jung-Jae and Jun Ji-Hyun.

The Korean original is, you will not be surprised to hear, the much superior movie. It tells the tale of a young woman who, when she

moves to the big city, leaves a note behind in her mailbox for the next tenant, asking him to forward on any mail received at the lovely sea cottage she is now leaving behind. The "next" tenant turns out to be the first and previous occupant of the house, however. (Have I lost you yet?) Before long the two leads are exchanging notes and gifts yet quickly realize that they are separated by two years.

The man, Sung-Hyun, is living in 1997, and the young woman, Eun-Joo, is living in 1999. Their epistolary relationship, aided by an ornate magical mailbox, blossoms into a deep connection. But the "blessing" of that relationship may well be doomed by their separation in time.

Although by no means a hopeless story, the most moving aspect of *Il Mare* is its unflinching exploration of modern loneliness. The two leads are separated by time from one another, but other emotional and social impediments keep them isolated from much of the rest of their world. Eun-Joo is still pining after a fiancé who went to the U.S. to study and forgot to come home to her. While Sung-Hyun seems haunted by his estrangement from the architect father who abandoned him as a child; a betrayal of family

that even interferes with the son's own ambitions as a building designer.

There is a quiet and a melancholy that is most memorable about *Il Mare*. The movie seems less interested in keeping the plot moving briskly along than it is in letting the viewer really experience the longing and solitude of the two leads. Depressing, you say? Actually, not at all.

What's depressing is what Hollywood does to perfectly good foreign originals. And *Il Mare* is no exception.

*The Lake House* is helmed by Argentinean director Alejandro Agresti, from an adapted screenplay by Pulitzer-prize winning playwright (for *Proof*) David Auburn. And although not a terrible film, it does manage to completely ruin the elegiac beauty of the original story.

As is the wont of American movies, it over-complicates the story and over-communicates the plot to the viewer. It telegraphs every relationship except that of the two leads, Dr. Kate Forster (Bullock) and builder Alex Wyler (Reeves) to their own loneliness. And it tries so hard to keep the time zigzag moving along at such a clip that it violates its own logic for no apparent reason other than to keep

us touched and surprised. (Which it fails to do. As soon as you know that Bullock's character has been recast as a doctor, you know exactly what shocking plot development is on its way.)

*Il Mare* silently and easily expresses in three very brief scenes the irreparable rift between Sung-Hyun and his father. *The Lake House* has to make a major diversion out of it, casting Christopher Plummer as Alex's arrogant but brilliant father and Ebon Moss-Bachrach as the great man's more obedient younger son. Now, no one does arrogant oldsters better than Christopher Plummer, but his character and scenes are actually a distraction from the key relationship between Kate and Alex. As is the sad-sack fiancé of Kate, played by Dylan Walsh (who is such a good, devoted guy that Kate's preference for a man she doesn't even know, and probably never will, makes her seem less than sympathetic).

Maybe the filmmakers made these decisions to scatter their energies on purpose, realizing that Bullock and Reeves had precious little chemistry when they played their couple of scenes together, and even less when they were reading letters to one another separated by space and time.



Yet this pairing must have seemed, going in, to be a casting slam dunk, since there had been plenty of chemistry between them in their first film together, *Speed*.

It's ironic, really. Modern actioners aren't exactly known for their believable romances or their subtle character development. Yet *Speed* accomplished both cinematic coups. The reason? The relationship between the two leads played by Reeves and Bullock was allowed to develop (slowly, despite the movie's title) while the characters were caught up dealing with action-packed crisis after crisis. And their growing bond was captured not in sappy statements like "We'll be together in time," but rather in a simple glance or gesture in the silences of a very tense bus (and later subway) ride.

Too bad the people behind *The Lake House* couldn't take a lesson from *Speed* — or at the very least, the original version of their story, *Il Mare*.

Despite his affinity for sf and fantasy film, you have to give Keanu credit for trying to put a little variety in his oeuvre. For his other summer sf film is about as far away from *The Lake House* as you can get. And it just happens to be the best, most

faithful adaptation of the work Philip K. Dick ever brought to the screen.

The film is *A Scanner Darkly*, an adaptation of Dick's most personal and troubling novel about the destructive power of addiction on the mind, body, and spirit of a man, and by extension, his society. And it has been lovingly translated to the screen by Richard Linklater.

Besides being an avowed PKD fan, Linklater knows a thing or two about themes like the questionable nature of reality and the marginalized lives and brilliant insanity of the crackpots, druggies, and conspiracy theorists who populate the "bohemian" side of cities like his hometown of Austin, Texas. This is the material Linklater has specialized in writing and directing in small indie-ish films over the years.

And although he has recently delved into more commercial screen expressions of the American eccentric — in movies like 2003's *School of Rock* and 2005's *Bad News Bears* — Linklater is best known for cult classics like the rambling community portrait *Slacker* (1991), a movie in which any number of the characters from Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* might have felt right at home.

In 2001, Linklater wrote and

directed a movie that was clearly a personal prelude to his work on *Scanner*. It was a film he decided to tell by means of a new computerized development of an early twentieth-century animation technique. Called "interpolated rotoscoping," the new process, using proprietary software developed by Bob Sabiston, allowed for painterly animation to be superimposed on live action photography.

Linklater's movie was called *Waking Life*, and it followed a young man (Wiley Wiggins) as he arrives at an unnamed town and wanders from place to place observing or passively interacting with scores of people with plenty to say about life, death, the future, and the nature of reality. After a while the young man questions whether he is caught in a constant dream state, or might even possibly be dead. In one of the last scenes, the young hero interacts with a man at a pinball machine, who relates an elaborate story concerning Philip K. Dick and the nature of time.

The man playing that pinball philosopher is none other than the writer-director himself, Richard Linklater.

Linklater is a man who is clearly capable of getting into Dickian head games. And the nervous,

surreal animation that he so aptly utilized in his own *Waking Life* is just as appropriate to capture the altered states, confused identity, and paranoid delusions of *A Scanner Darkly*.

Central to the plot is Bob Arctor (Reeves), who is also, apparently, an Orange County Sheriff's Department narcotics undercover agent called "Fred." Unfortunately, both Bob and Officer Fred are now addicted to a botanically based and highly damaging street drug called Substance D. Bob's friends are equally under the influence and feeling the damage. These pals include a man named Freck (Rory Cochrane), who hallucinates about being constantly swarmed by aphids; a bright, very verbal, and utterly treacherous housemate named Barris (Robert Downey, Jr.); an affable stoner named Luckman (Woody Harrelson); and Bob's love-interest, a strung-out retail clerk and sometime dealer named Donna (Winona Ryder).

There are a few sf touches in both the book and the movie. These include the "scramble suit," a holographic identity jumbler worn by narcs to hide their true appearance and identity. But Dick's novel and Linklater's movie are really not futuristic or fantastical except for these few trappings. The

story of *A Scanner Darkly* is instead an all-too-realistic and contemporary exploration of an addict's descent into self-destruction and paranoia.

As in all Dick stories, paranoia is fully justified in this seedy suburban realm. There are vast corporate and governmental conspiracies at play. And even people in Arctor's inner circle might really be out to destroy him — if Substance D doesn't do the job first.

Keanu Reeves is surprisingly effective in the central role of Bob/Fred/and later, Bruce. But this is just the kind of alienated and altered character that Keanu has always played so effectively. Downey and Harrelson — both of whom know a great deal about the illegally medicated life — are also quite good, and it's their mordantly hilarious riffs that offer a little absurdist comic relief in this very dark tale.

But how do you even judge an acting performance when it's been painted over by a team of animators using computer software? That's the kind of question about what's real and true that even Mr. D. might appreciate.

Suffice it to say that *A Scanner Darkly* is a very fine film in which the writing, directing, performing,

and technical arts all serve their story very well indeed. Did I *enjoy* it? Not really. Like the novel, I found the whole thing as depressing as hell. Maybe that's the point. (And that's probably why the audiences of America flocked like happy sheep to *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and stayed away from this haunting movie in droves.)

But here's a question for you: Is there such a thing as an *un-product* placement? At several points in the novel *A Scanner Darkly*, Donna denounces and physically rips off or attacks the Coca Cola Company and its vehicles. She sees Coke as a great symbol of all-pervasive corporate evil. (And, heck, former President Bill Clinton, with his recent campaign against sugary soft drinks and their creation of obese, sugar-addicted children would probably agree with her.) And yet, that is one aspect of the novel that Linklater doesn't touch in his very faithful adaptation.

Was there, perchance, a Big Pay-Off made by Coke to stay out of the movie? Or, perhaps, an even larger Corporate Conspiracy between the beverage industry leader and Warner Brothers?

Can't be! Sorry! I must be getting paranoid. ☹

*After we published two consecutive issues without a new story from Mr. Reed in either, we received some concerned letters from people wondering if his story "The Cure" hadn't had some unfortunate consequences. Not to worry, folks, Mr. Reed is alive and well and living in Lincoln, Nebraska. His latest speculation about the future is one that will probably strike a chord with a lot of our readers.*

# Pills Forever

*By Robert Reed*

**E**XPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT me that at this point, before you and I go one more inch down this road, I need to tell you about my cat:

I don't know Louise's age. Nobody does. My third wife found her roaming through the sirloin grove behind the little snowbird village where we used to live in the winter. She was a small white cat with yellow touches on her ears and tail. A Turkish van, maybe, except her fur was too short. There was no collar or chip, but human hands had held her long enough to have her spayed. She could have been two years old, or four, or maybe seven. Our veterinarian made a guess, but I forgot that ages ago. What I do remember is that he was sure that our little cat had survived inside that sirloin grove for a long time, living off wild mice and unripened meat, all while evading coyotes and a multitude of cat-murdering diseases.

Louise was never an outgoing creature, much less sweet. Her name was my wife's inspiration. Somehow that rangy little predator reminded her of a favorite maiden aunt, aloof and with a fondness for old white

dresses. For another six years, I lived with both of those women, and at some ill-defined point, the cat decided that I was a trusted source of food and warmth, rewarding me with the occasional sprawl in my lap, and in moments of runaway affection, a bone-rattling purr.

One winter afternoon, while my wife was driving home from the grocery, an ancient Cadillac struck her car broadside. The 102-year-old driver had a suspended license, yet somehow he had managed to fool the autopilot into relinquishing the wheel. As a consequence, an unfortunate woman lingered for a miserable ten days before I finally allowed the doctors to suspend their ineffectual treatments. Then I sold both our winter trailer and the townhouse in Minnesota, and with my cat riding beside me in a roomy crate, I set out to build a new life.

Except, of course, there's only one life to be built, and we work on it every day.

When I was a very young fellow, back when the millennium was new, I boasted to my girlfriends that I didn't particularly care what I did for a living, but I fully intended to live as close to forever as possible.

Their typical response was sweet nervous laughter.

"No, really," I'd continue. "Our generation is the first to have a real shot at immortality. Between advances in medicine and in genetics, plus the rising tide of wealth, a lot of amazing things are going to be possible. And soon."

I graduated from college in '03, still happily single but suddenly responsible for my own meals. I soon discovered that my little wounds didn't heal as quickly as they should. Paper cuts on my fingers and razor cuts on my face had a habit of lingering. So I began taking multivitamins. Every morning, the cheapest brand I could find. I also tried to eat better. Fruits. Green vegetables. Fish twice a week, and beef only sparingly. Plus I took up exercise in a conscientious way. Between the pills, the food, and those sweaty workouts, I started to feel and look better, and the surface damage wrought by life seemed to heal more quickly than before.

I wasn't thirty when I started playing with megadoses of popular antioxidants. I swallowed beta-carotene until I learned that in controlled studies, the vitamin actually shortened life spans. But I kept the faith about taking vitamin E-gamma and a lot of C on a daily basis, plus an

increasingly elaborate multivitamin — with zinc and selenium, and lutein for my label-reading eyes. After thirty, I joined the glucosamine club — three pills every day to fend off future joint pains. To help maintain muscle strength, I dosed myself with L-carnitine and alpha-lipoic acid. I was forty when the first super-antioxidants hit the market, and by the time I was fifty, I was wolfing down the full range of bitter, half-proven elixirs.

I have always been a creature of tiny, treasured routines.

Surveys show that within any random group of citizens, the supremely fit individuals are least likely to die. That's why I built my life around long workouts. To save wear on knees and the spinal column, I concentrated on swimming and riding fast on a razor-tired bike. Later, I added three weekly sessions of weights, with twenty minutes each morning devoted to stretching my limbs in every bearable direction.

As a rule, my most enduring lovers have been health and vanity.

Just so you know.

My first wife and I stayed married long enough for her to convince me to combat my modest balding by every available means. It was my second wife, sitting smug in her thirties, who talked me into dyeing that chemically grown hair until it returned to the lustrous, convincing brown that you can see for yourself.

That young wife had some very sophisticated products for her face and hands. Entire rainforests had been shredded just to fill a few important jars with unscented lotions and cool white salves. Tailored species of bacteria lived to erase her little wrinkles and soften the deep old ones to where Botox could finish them off. And I will admit that on occasion, yes, I played with her treasures. But the trick I liked best was the lighting in her bathroom. Special LEDs threw a soft warm glow over every surface, creating an illusion of vigorous youth that could carry any soul through another day's decline.

After fifty, I began keeping a thorough journal, recording how much time and money were spent on this living-forever business. Fourteen hours of every week was dedicated to sweat, I discovered, as well as nearly five percent of my annual pre-tax income.

Six days after my fifty-second birthday, I learned that my wrinkle-free wife was sleeping with not one, but two young gentlemen.

After that divorce, I began taking the generic form of Viagra-Supreme. Daily. In addition to supercharging sex, vitamin V helps lower my blood pressure and improves my lung performance. And needless to say, that single blue tablet is my favorite pill of the day.

**I WANT TO WARN YOU:** When people grow old — I mean ridiculously old, like I am — they reach a lofty place where their past resembles an enormous pile of oddly shaped, plainly mismatched blocks. They can stare at the pile, and intellectually they'll understand that here is their life, each block representing a day or week or month. But most of their blocks have been lost forever, and the majority of the rest are buried and invisible inside that pile. No one can line up their blocks in the proper order. Biographies become chaotic shambles built around a few treasured days. Last month or a hundred years ago — it doesn't matter, since old minds play tricks, making every memory feel true and urgent to the ancient soul who lived through them.

Perched high on my mountain of blocks is a small black day.

I remember standing inside an office that could have belonged to a successful physician. The almost-comfortable furnishings and bright lights were appropriate to the medical profession. Every surface was clean enough for lab work, while the air was scrubbed of dust and a fat portion of the usual microbes. That cleanliness gave the place its distinct chill — which is a good thing to find in a doctor's office, I believe. Medical authorities need to exist inside cold, analytical environments. How else can they determine what has gone wrong? And where else would their patients, hearing a sober verdict, actually believe it was true?

But this wasn't my doctor's office. The back wall was covered with small cages stacked on top of one another. Other walls were decorated with stylized images of healthy cats, one after another drawn by creative AIs, the ever-changing felines always rendered in the most charming poses. The receptionist stood behind the counter, wearing a warm smile and a plastic face that looked fetchingly human until my final steps. Louise was locked securely inside her own cage, complaining mightily about her unjust confinement. I set my cat on the counter, introducing both of us. "Hello, Louise," the robot said to the prisoner. Then it

generated a series of forms, telling me, "Please, sir, read everything in full and fill in every blank, then sign and date each of these pages."

As a new customer, I had to define myself: I gave away my name and address, plus a few of my most important numbers. Then in greater detail, I defined my cat, including her possible breed and an approximate date of birth.

Did my cat have insurance?

I checked the "No" box.

Poor Louise.

The form responded instantly, creating a fresh set of questions. How did I intend to pay for her care?

I pressed my iridium card against the reader's face.

The final page covered the entire screen, and because of the dense legal phrasing, I read the waiver twice. From what I could tell, the veterinarian was asking permission to treat my animal by whatever means she deemed necessary, until that moment when treatment was no longer required/or effective.

I signed and dated the last lines, and a moment later, my very miserable cat yowled and took a huge dump.

I tried not to breathe, waiting for the air to be scrubbed clean again.

But I knew better than to let Louise run free. So we just sat there, she and I, enduring that magnificent stink.

My third wife was my last, I should tell you. That wasn't my decision so much as it was everybody else's. Insurance companies used to let spouses join policies, but not anymore. And most of the world's governments were making it easy for singles to enjoy the tax benefits held by legally bonded couples. Courtship and love might be eternal, but brides and grooms have always been a game of numbers. And since I wasn't as well-to-do as some, I had to play a careful game with what remained of my money.

Louise and I spent a decade enjoying our very cheap retirement, moving from one warm city to another until I had no choice but return to work.

In one sense, I was lucky: My next twelve years brought a good living. I had a new career helping the newly retired — people who were two or



three decades younger than I — training them with behaviors and attitudes that would help them live forever, or nearly so.

An early client was a strong little woman who had endured an astonishing number of cosmetic surgeries. We enjoyed each other's company, and Louise took some considerable pleasure in sleeping between those augmented, gravity-defying breasts. We lived together for ten years, in fact, each promising the other that this was just a temporary affair and we'd probably split up in another century or two.

That lover had secrets, as it happens. I knew she had money at one time, but I'd been encouraged to believe that it had paid for her creative bodywork. I didn't understand that she actually lied about quite a lot, and she was keeping even more from me; and despite a thousand good feelings toward the woman, I didn't know her at all.

Thunderbolts arrived when she fell sick. A human physician in another chilled office determined that an unsuspected, rarely seen retrovirus was running wild through her little body.

Nature is thick with disease.

Most viral infections give no warning. Phages slip inside you without triggering symptoms. And the cleverest of these viruses evade your immune systems, inserting their RNA, in this case, into a few likely pancreatic cells, and then reproducing themselves on a modest, virtually unnoticeable scale.

Thousands of unusual ailments roam the world, which is why so many people die of rare diseases.

My lover's doctor was a youngster, barely sixty. "We don't have much experience with her specific condition," he confessed to me. "If she was your age, we would probably try to enzymatically reinvigorate key genes —"

"Wait," I interrupted. "Are you saying she needs to be older than she already is?"

It took the poor fellow several moments to piece together the puzzle. Then with a shamed shake of the head, he admitted, "I'm sorry, I thought you knew. She's twenty years older than you."

"Since when?" I asked, too stunned to think clearly.

The doctor wisely ignored my exceptionally stupid question. "She's been a very lucky individual," he assured me. "She spent a considerable

fortune on every new treatment, back when these technologies were out-of-reach to most people. And unlike most of her generation, the rejuvenators worked as promised."

"Her generation?" I muttered, still wrapping my head around the concept.

Doctors know how to offer sympathetic smiles.

But of course my lover's age didn't matter at all. Stepping back, I gave a low moan. Then I asked the only important question: "Is there anything...anything at all...you can do for her?"

With a rational chill, the doctor said, "We have many options. Yes, sir."

That's what experts say whenever they don't know what to do. No one has more paths to follow than the man who has completely lost his way.

If you didn't know me, I bet you could still guess my age to within ten years.

Look at this skin. It's astonishingly youthful, all things considered. But what wrinkling there is gives you clues: My face and the backs of my hands are smooth, but gullies have sprung up in the hard-to-observe places. Like the backsides of my legs and the smooth reaches of my bare butt. Implanted teeth bolster my smile, which is only a little less white than milk. I can still build up a respectable tan, but "tan" is a misnomer, since my flesh has a yellow, or some might say pee-colored cast. And while a couple million moles and freckles have emerged during my days, dermatologists keep winning the war. See what lasers can do? They leave behind speckles of cured flesh that are just a little paler than normal. Anti-freckles, I call these ghostly wounds.

Look at my muscles, and imagine my bones. I have retained a spectacularly youthful cast, I'd like to believe. Treatments championed by astronauts allow me to train in the most effective ways, and by using deep-space medications, I can slap on calcium wherever it needs to be. Infusions of hot cartilage keep my joints and ligaments pliable. (With the help of lucky caution: I never murdered my knees playing soccer or slipping in the shower.) My body fat hovers near twelve percent. And I would love to hear you say that I look remarkably good in any swimsuit.

Yet the ugly truth is, I'm not as strong as my package makes me appear. Even on my best day, the world feels heavier than it should. My jumbled mind has clear recollections about how a gallon of milk hangs in the hand, but for some reason, gravity tugs harder on the bottle these days, and the arm is quick to complain.

According to my records, more than half of my medical budget is dedicated to a few pounds of blood-infused fat. I endure an annual scan that examines every cubic millimeter of my brain, comparing what's seen with a base-map drawn up nearly thirty years ago. Sophisticated cocktails of enzymes and genetic triggers help fool the old organ into acting young again. At a controlled pace, new neurons and glial cells are born, while melatonin and a host of neurotransmitters are set at the most perfect, soul-enhancing levels. And for every expensive sleight of hand, I perform half a dozen tricks on my own. Vitamins and safe stimulants come to me through the mail. Word puzzles and geometric puzzles keep me thinking along fresh zig-zaggy lines. On a regular schedule, I acquire new skills. A few years ago, I mastered juggling three soft balls. And I followed that mind-enhancing success with two years of reacquainting myself with French.

Everything is constantly changing, including me. To keep halfway informed about medical developments, I read every journal article with any potential value. I always listen to people of my general age, absorbing their gossip and rumors as well as the occasional informed opinion. That's how I learned that traveling above four thousand feet in elevation statistically shortens your lifespan. Oh well, I never liked the mountains that much.

Somebody else told me that a new species of dinoflagellates can be sprinkled on your morning cereal, and when you eat those bitter bodies, your sense of balance improves. And several respectable friends pointed me toward a Panamanian biotech concern that sells a special kit that monitors the electrolytes in your brain, then brews precise amounts of salty fluids that keep every system on track, reducing those embarrassing moments when an old man can't remember if he brushed his teeth after his low-altitude, dinoflagellate breakfast.

Back to Louise, yes.

The feline veterinarian was a handsome woman of no particular age or race. Her voice had a lovely accent that I couldn't place, and her

manners were crisp and pleasant, particularly when dealing with a difficult new patient.

She opened the carrier, claws and yellow teeth leading the charge.

An unconcerned hand absorbed the worst of the blows, and the woman laughed softly, her other hand expertly grabbing the mad beast from behind and shoving it down onto the bright steel tabletop.

"Diamond gloves," she confided with a wink.

I finally noticed the sparkle on her brown flesh.

"You know," she said calmly, stretching padded restraints over Louise's limbs and scrawny body. "If your dates are correct, this is probably the second oldest cat currently with me."

"The dates are pretty much right," I answered.

She looked up. "How?"

"Pardon?"

"How did you keep this old gal alive for so long?" She was appreciative if not quite amazed. "Discounting luck and genetics, of course. Since it's obvious your little friend is blessed in both categories."

"Thank my dead wife," I began.

The vet watched me carefully now.

"She died in a car wreck. It was two days after a shipment of medicines arrived from Costa Rica. And since they were paid for — "

"You used them on Louise."

"I guessed the dosages. I don't remember the formulas, but there was something that was supposed to help her telomeres grow long again. And my wife had a huge bottle of super-antioxidants that were guaranteed to work miracles with people — "

She interrupted, naming one elixir by its chemical label. "But it didn't pan out in human studies," she added.

"I know."

"Ironically, it only works on mice and felines."

I remembered that too.

The veterinarian's exam began while we chatted. Ten different machines jockeyed for position around the helpless, enraged beast, stealing blood and single white hairs and samples of pale flesh and green-eye tissue. Then a new wave of machines took aim, delicate probes entering her from both ends at once, taking samples from her throat and long gut.

My cat moaned her vivid curses.

Results came swiftly, and apparently, nothing the veterinarian discovered was even a little bit surprising.

"She started misbehaving when? Three months ago?"

"About," I agreed.

"The biting. The slashing."

"She's never been what you'd call warm," I allowed. "But she was pleasant enough, until one day —"

I showed her my recent wounds, all healing with a commendable speed.

"Here's what is really interesting," said the veterinarian, enthusiasm making her face look younger. "Cats, I'm sure you know...they age considerably faster than people do. Even though you were an adult when you met this darling, and she was relatively young...your Louise long ago passed you in terms of her effective biological lifespan...."

I'd already made those calculations for myself. But hearing an expert's confirmation pleased me.

"I should and will do more tests," she promised.

Imagining the costs, I gasped.

"But I can pretty much assure you what her trouble is." She stroked the furious cat, her hand skating down the head and bony back. "There's a low-strength prion at work in her brain. Not like mad-cow disease, since it doesn't have the same brutal effectiveness. But a key protein is still misfolding, gradually changing the shape of its neighbors. In all of history, only a few hundred cats have suffered this fate. It's a question of her extreme age and certain subtle effects building over time."

I nodded, feeling an appropriate dread.

She read my face and stroked my forearm with the same gesture she had used on Louise. "In human terms, your cat is several centuries old. And you've taken extraordinarily good care of her, sir."

"I've tried my best."

"You've done a remarkable job," she said. "The best foods, the perfect vitamin cocktails. With these tests, I can see how good you've been to her. And of course, you never let your girl wander outdoors."

"Not in ages, no."

The veterinarian sighed deeply, staring into my eyes as if trying to

weigh my soul. Then very quietly, she mentioned, "There's very little I can offer. But that doesn't mean we don't have options."

Every one of my cat bites seemed to ache.

"There are ways to create new proteins. Anti-prions, they're called. I can't do it myself, but I can send samples to a lab in Bombay, and they'll do the analysis and create a proper macromolecule that we can slip into the sick brain...and then I think we have a fair chance of bringing this disease under control. And eventually, if Louise has any remaining good fortune...we can reverse the damage and bring back the girl you've known for all these years..."

"How much?" I squeaked.

The woman shook her head. With a quiet, careful voice, she said, "I really don't know. This kind of work is attempted so infrequently — "

"I meant my bill so far. How much has this morning cost?"

The answer involved a simple push of a button. But the figures were still growing as various machines spat out raw data.

I tried to speak, but my voice failed me.

"There are other options," the veterinarian continued. "And if you wish, we could euthanize her. Whenever you feel ready."

I felt many emotions, but none of them were ready for death. Staring at the poor creature, watching her fight against the restraints and soulless machines, I said quietly, "This disease looks like an awful way to die."

"If she does die," she replied. "This process is so slow, and there's evidence that these lazy prions rarely eat up more than one or two portions of a brain."

"What about me?" I asked.

"There's nothing to worry about," she chimed in. "Even if you ingested her brain tissue, and in huge quantities, you'd never get infected."

"No. I'm talking about my head. My brain."

"Sir?"

"If this cat is that much older than me, doesn't that imply that she's showing me the future? Showing both of us? One day, some little protein is going to turn against us, and we're going to be strapped on that table, hissing and spitting at the world."

Judging by her wide-eyed expression, the veterinarian had never

imagined such an eternity. A painful pause ended when she straightened her back, and trying to smile, she asked, "What do you wish to do now, sir?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Muddle along like always, I guess."



ACCORDING TO my journals, I spend thirty-two hours every week in the maintenance of my youth and good health. I also invest another ten hours caring for an elderly white cat. Nearly a quarter of my income goes toward our mutual wellbeing, and four-fifths of my worries, and from that, I think you can get a sense for how important these two lives are to me.

Extrapolate the figures, and there comes a personal crush-point just before the year 2300.

But really, what human being could spend every waking moment eating pills and doing sit-ups, all while submitting to unending scans of his tightly orchestrated bodies? Before the money and luck are gone, and before every waking moment of every day is spent on maintenance, hard decisions are going to become easy. I'll skip some little treatment, or maybe I'll forget my antioxidants on the worst possible day. And shortly after that, in a process barely noticeable at first, everything begins its inevitable collapse.

You know, each of us lives on a mountaintop.

Alone.

At first, your mountain is low and fertile. You can do whatever you want, and if you fall, you can bounce up again. But think of my image of blocks representing time: Your mountains grow tall and broaden out, blocks balanced on blocks, and eventually you find yourself standing on top of a chaotic pile with no place left to step. You have little freedom. You spend your existence holding very still, if you're lucky...nothing below but darkness and a chilled wind mournfully calling your name....

When Louise got sick, I had a girlfriend. A youngster, she was. Barely eighty-five. She was a tall taut woman who according to the customs of her strange generation kept her hair shaved and her boobs shrunk down to where they would never sag. She didn't appreciate being slashed by mad predators, so whenever she visited my apartment, I was supposed to shove my cat into the extra bedroom. After my expensive trip to the vet's, my

girlfriend found me building a permanent cage in one corner of the living room. The exhausted cat was curled up inside her crate, sleeping away. The woman knelt down to risk a peek, then asked, "How did it go?"

I told the story.

From her expression, I knew what she was thinking. But she didn't say it until she found the kindest possible words.

"Think of the poor creature's misery," she told me.

I'd been thinking about little else lately.

"Is this any sort of life?" she asked. "Is it right to keep her alive? In this terrible state?"

But Louise was happily asleep, at least for the moment.

"What? Are you really thinking about paying for those treatments?"

"I doubt I could afford them," I admitted. Then I confessed my thoughts to her, and in effect, to myself too. "But in several years, in a few decades...someday... these treatments are going to become routine and halfway cheap. So what I did...I bought a pair of diamond gloves from my vet. I'll feed Louise and put medicines in her food and clean up after her. Then if I need, I'll get a diamond suit and goggles and spend an hour every day fighting with her."

"That's crazy," that hairless, breastless woman said to me.

I responded with a list of names. Two sisters and a brother. My parents and uncles and aunts. Three wives and one girlfriend who was as good as a wife, and half a hundred other important, much loved people who hadn't been as large in my existence for half as long as this one crazy-ass cat has been.

"This is me in another fifty years," I told her, pointing at the locked carrier. "And it's you fifty years after that."

"I wouldn't live inside a cage," she snapped.

I believed her.

Staring at me, she asked, "Would you accept such an existence?"

I was ready. With a laugh and slicing motion from my cut-up hand, I said to her exactly what I'm going to say to you now:

"Would you shove me inside a safe cage? And feed me and clean me and give me pills forever? Because if you aren't ready to do that for me...then sadly, my dear, I think you should find your way out the door...." ₹



*Last year, Susanna Clarke's first novel, Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell, became an international bestseller and won a passel of awards. Those of you who have read the book know that all we've seen thus far of John Uskglass, the Raven King, is what other people think about him. Here now is a story that shows us a bit more of his life and character. (Readers of JS & MN might note that this story is the "curious tale" to which Mr. Norrell refers in chapter 63.)*

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# John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner

*By Susanna Clarke*

*This retelling of a popular Northern English folktale is taken from A Child's History of the Raven King by John Waterbury, Lord Portishead. It bears similarities to other old stories in which a great ruler is outwitted by one of his humblest subjects and, because of this, many scholars have argued that it has no historical basis.*

**M**ANY SUMMERS AGO IN a clearing in a wood in Cumbria there lived a Charcoal Burner. He was a very poor man. His clothes were ragged and he was generally sooty and dirty. He had no wife or children, and his only companion was a small pig called Blakeman. Most of the time he stayed in the clearing which contained just two things: an earth-covered stack of smoldering charcoal and a hut built of sticks and pieces of turf. But in spite of all this he was a cheerful soul — unless crossed in any way.

One bright summer's morning a stag ran into the clearing. After the stag came a large pack of hunting dogs, and after the dogs came a crowd

of horsemen with bows and arrows. For some moments nothing could be seen but a great confusion of baying dogs, sounding horns, and thundering hooves. Then, as quickly as they had come, the huntsmen disappeared among the trees at the far end of the clearing — all but one man.

The Charcoal Burner looked around. His grass was churned to mud; not a stick of his hut remained standing; and his neat stack of charcoal was half-dismantled and fires were bursting forth from it. In a blaze of fury he turned upon the remaining huntsman and began to heap upon the man's head every insult he had ever heard.

But the huntsman had problems of his own. The reason that he had not ridden off with the others was that Blakeman was running, this way and that, beneath his horse's hooves, squealing all the while. Try as he might, the huntsman could not get free of him. The huntsman was very finely dressed in black, with boots of soft black leather and a jeweled harness. He was in fact John Uskglass (otherwise called the Raven King), King of Northern England and parts of Faerie, and the greatest magician that ever lived. But the Charcoal Burner (whose knowledge of events outside the woodland clearing was very imperfect) guessed nothing of this. He only knew that the man would not answer him and this infuriated him more than ever. "Say something!" he cried.

A stream ran through the clearing. John Uskglass glanced at it, then at Blakeman running about beneath his horse's hooves. He flung out a hand and Blakeman was transformed into a salmon. The salmon leapt through the air into the brook and swam away. Then John Uskglass rode off.

The Charcoal Burner stared after him. "Well, now what am I going to do?" he said.

He extinguished the fires in the clearing and he repaired the stack of charcoal as best he could. But a stack of charcoal that has been trampled over by hounds and horses cannot be made to look the same as one that has never received such injuries, and it hurt the Charcoal Burner's eyes to look at such a botched, broken thing.

He went down to Furness Abbey to ask the monks to give him some supper because his own supper had been trodden into the dirt. When he reached the Abbey he inquired for the Almoner whose task it is to give food and clothes to the poor. The Almoner greeted him in a kindly manner

and gave him a beautiful round cheese and a warm blanket and asked what had happened to make his face so long and sad.

So the Charcoal Burner told him; but the Charcoal Burner was not much practiced in the art of giving clear accounts of complicated events. For example he spoke at great length about the huntsman who had got left behind, but he made no mention of the man's fine clothes or the jeweled rings on his fingers, so the Almoner had no suspicion that it might be the King. In fact the Charcoal Burner called him "a black man" so that the Almoner imagined he meant a dirty man — just such another one as the Charcoal Burner himself.

The Almoner was all sympathy. "So poor Blakeman is a salmon now, is he?" he said. "If I were you, I would go and have a word with Saint Kentigern. I am sure he will help you. He knows all about salmon."

"Saint Kentigern, you say? And where will I find such a useful person?" asked the Charcoal Burner eagerly.

"He has a church in Grizedale. That is the road over there."

So the Charcoal Burner walked to Grizedale, and when he came to the church he went inside and banged on the walls and bawled out Saint Kentigern's name, until Saint Kentigern looked out of Heaven and asked what the matter was.

Immediately the Charcoal Burner began a long indignant speech describing the injuries that had been done to him, and in particular the part played by the solitary huntsman.

"Well," said Saint Kentigern, cheerfully. "Let me see what I can do. Saints, such as I, ought always to listen attentively to the prayers of poor, dirty, ragged men, such as you. No matter how offensively those prayers are phrased. You are our special care."

"I am though?" said the Charcoal Burner, who was rather flattered to hear this.

Then Saint Kentigern reached down from Heaven, put his hand into the church font and pulled out a salmon. He shook the salmon a little and the next moment there was Blakeman, as dirty and clever as ever.

The Charcoal Burner laughed and clapped his hands. He tried to embrace Blakeman but Blakeman just ran about, squealing, with his customary energy.

"There," said Saint Kentigern, looking down on this pleasant scene with some delight. "I am glad I was able to answer your prayer."

"Oh, but you have not!" declared the Charcoal Burner. "You must punish my wicked enemy!"

Then Saint Kentigern frowned a little and explained how one ought to forgive one's enemies. But the Charcoal Burner had never practiced Christian forgiveness before and he was not in a mood to begin now. "Let Blencathra fall on his head!" he cried with his eyes ablaze and his fists held high. (Blencathra is a high hill some miles to the north of Grizedale.)

"Well, no," said Saint Kentigern diplomatically. "I really cannot do that. But I think you said this man was a hunter? Perhaps the loss of a day's sport will teach him to treat his neighbours with more respect."

The moment that Saint Kentigern said these words, John Uskglass (who was still hunting) tumbled down from his horse and into a cleft in some rocks. He tried to climb out but found that he was held there by some mysterious power. He tried to do some magic to counter it, but the magic did not work. The rocks and earth of England loved John Uskglass well. They would always wish to help him if they could, but this power — whatever it was — was something they respected even more.

He remained in the cleft all day and all night, until he was thoroughly cold, wet, and miserable. At dawn the unknown power suddenly released him — why, he could not tell. He climbed out, found his horse, and rode back to his castle at Carlisle.

"Where have you been?" asked William of Lanchester. "We expected you yesterday."

Now John Uskglass did not want any one to know that there might be a magician in England more powerful than himself. So he thought for a moment. "France," he said.

"France!" William of Lanchester looked surprized. "And did you see the King? What did he say? Are they planning new wars?"

John Uskglass gave some vague, mystical, and magician-like reply. Then he went up to his room and sat down upon the floor by his silver dish of water. Then he spoke to Persons of Great Importance (such as the West Wind or the Stars) and asked them to tell him who had caused him to be thrown into the cleft. Into his dish came a vision of the Charcoal Burner.

John Uskglass called for his horse and his dogs, and he rode to the clearing in the wood.

Meanwhile the Charcoal Burner was toasting some of the cheese the Almoner had given him. Then he went to look for Blakeman, because there were few things in the world that Blakeman liked as much as toasted cheese.

While he was gone John Uskglass arrived with his dogs. He looked around at the clearing for some clue as to what had happened. He wondered why a great and dangerous magician would chuse to live in a wood and earn his living as a charcoal burner. His eye fell upon the toasted cheese.

Now toasted cheese is a temptation few men can resist, be they charcoal burners or kings. John Uskglass reasoned thus: all of Cumbria belonged to him — therefore this wood belonged to him — therefore this toasted cheese belonged to him. So he sat down and ate it, allowing his dogs to lick his fingers when he was done.

At that moment the Charcoal Burner returned. He stared at John Uskglass and at the empty green leaves where his toasted cheese had been. "You!" he cried. "It is you! You ate my dinner!" He took hold of John Uskglass and shook him hard. "Why? Why do you these things?"

John Uskglass said not a word. (He felt himself to be at something of a disadvantage.) He shook himself free from the Charcoal Burner's grasp, mounted upon his horse and rode out of the clearing.

The Charcoal Burner went down to Furness Abbey again. "That wicked man came back and ate my toasted cheese!" he told the Almoner.

The Almoner shook his head sadly at the sinfulness of the world. "Have some more cheese," he offered. "And perhaps some bread to go with it?"

"Which saint is it that looks after cheeses?" demanded the Charcoal Burner.

The Almoner thought for a moment. "That would be Saint Bridget," he said.

"And where will I find her ladyship?" asked the Charcoal Burner, eagerly.

"She has a church at Beckermes," replied the Almoner, and he pointed the way the Charcoal Burner ought to take.

So the Charcoal Burner walked to Beckermes and when he got to the church he banged the altar plates together and roared and made a great deal

of noise until Saint Bridget looked anxiously out of Heaven and asked if there was any thing she could do for him.

The Charcoal Burner gave a long description of the injuries his silent enemy had done him.

Saint Bridget said she was sorry to hear it. "But I do not think I am the proper person to help you. I look after milkmaids and dairymen. I encourage the butter to come and the cheeses to ripen. I have nothing to do with cheese that has been eaten by the wrong person. Saint Nicholas looks after thieves and stolen property. Or there is Saint Alexander of Comana who loves Charcoal Burners. Perhaps," she added hopefully, "you would like to pray to one of them?"

The Charcoal Burner declined to take an interest in the persons she mentioned. "Poor, ragged, dirty men like me are your special care!" he insisted, "Do a miracle!"

"But perhaps," said Saint Bridget, "this man does not mean to offend you by his silence. Have you considered that he may be mute?"

"Oh, no! I saw him speak to his dogs. They wagged their tails in delight to hear his voice. Saint, do your work! Let Blencathra fall on his head!"

Saint Bridget sighed. "No, no, we cannot do that; but certainly he is wrong to steal your dinner. Perhaps it might be as well to teach him a lesson. Just a small one."

At that moment John Uskglass and his court were preparing to go hunting. A cow wandered into the stable yard. It ambled up to where John Uskglass stood by his horse and began to preach him a sermon in Latin on the wickedness of stealing. Then his horse turned its head and told him solemnly that it quite agreed with the cow and that he should pay good attention to what the cow said.

All the courtiers and the servants in the stable yard fell silent and stared at the scene. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

"This is magic!" declared William of Lanchester. "But who would dare...?"

"I did it myself," said John Uskglass quickly.

"Really?" said William. "Why?"

There was a pause. "To help me contemplate my sins and errors," said John Uskglass at last, "as a Christian should from time to time."

"But stealing is not a sin of yours! So why...?"

"Good God, William!" cried John Uskglass. "Must you ask so many questions? I shall not hunt today!"

He hurried away to the rose garden to escape the horse and the cow. But the roses turned their red-and-white faces toward him and spoke at length about his duty to the poor; and some of the more ill-natured flowers hissed, "Thief! Thief!" He shut his eyes and put his fingers in his ears, but his dogs came and found him and pushed their noses in his face and told him how very, very disappointed they were in him. So he went and hid in a bare little room at the top of the castle. But all that day the stones of the walls loudly debated the various passages in the Bible that condemn stealing.

John Uskglass had no need to inquire who had done this (the cow, horse, dogs, stones and roses had all made particular mention of toasted cheese); and he was determined to discover who this strange magician was and what he wanted. He decided to employ that most magical of all creatures — the raven. An hour later a thousand or so ravens were despatched in a flock so dense that it was as if a black mountain were flying through the summer sky. When they arrived at the Charcoal Burner's clearing, they filled every part of it with a tumult of black wings. The leaves were swept from the trees, and the Charcoal Burner and Blakeman were knocked to the ground and battered about. The ravens searched the Charcoal Burner's memories and dreams for evidence of magic. Just to be on the safe side, they searched Blakeman's memories and dreams too. The ravens looked to see what man and pig had thought when they were still in their mothers' wombs; and they looked to see what both would do when finally they came to Heaven. They found not a scrap of magic anywhere.

When they were gone, John Uskglass walked into the clearing with his arms folded, frowning. He was deeply disappointed at the ravens' failure.

The Charcoal Burner got slowly up from the ground and looked around in amazement. If a fire had ravaged the wood, the destruction could scarcely have been more complete. The branches were torn from the trees and a thick, black layer of raven feathers lay over everything. In a sort of ecstasy of indignation, he cried, "Tell me why you persecute me!"

But John Uskglass said not a word.

"I will make Blencathra fall on your head! I will do it! You know I can!" He jabbed his dirty finger in John Uskglass's face. "You — know — I — can!"

The next day the Charcoal Burner appeared at Furness Abbey before the sun was up. He found the Almoner, who was on his way to Prime. "He came back and shattered my wood," he told him. "He made it black and ugly!"

"What a terrible man!" said the Almoner, sympathetically.

"What saint is in charge of ravens?" demanded the Charcoal Burner.

"Ravens?" said the Almoner. "None that I know of." He thought for a moment. "Saint Oswald had a pet raven of which he was extremely fond."

"And where would I find his saintliness?"

"He has a new church at Grasmere."

So the Charcoal Burner walked to Grasmere and when he got there, he shouted and banged on the walls with a candlestick.

Saint Oswald put his head out of Heaven and cried, "Do you have to shout so loud? I am not deaf! What do you want? And put down that candlestick! It was expensive!" During their holy and blessed lives Saint Kentigern and Saint Bridget had been a monk and a nun respectively; they were full of mild, saintly patience. But Saint Oswald had been a king and a soldier, and he was a very different sort of person.

"The Almoner at Furness Abbey says you like ravens," explained the Charcoal Burner.

"'Like' is putting it a little strong," said Saint Oswald. "There was a bird in the seventh century that used to perch on my shoulder. It pecked my ears and made them bleed."

The Charcoal Burner described how he was persecuted by the silent man.

"Well, perhaps he has reason for behaving as he does?" said Saint Oswald, sarcastically. "Have you, for example, made great big dents in his expensive candlesticks?"

The Charcoal Burner indignantly denied ever having hurt the silent man.

"Hmm," said Saint Oswald, thoughtfully. "Only kings can hunt deer, you know."



The Charcoal Burner looked blank.

"Let us see," said Saint Oswald. "A man in black clothes, with powerful magic and ravens at his command, and the hunting rights of a king. This suggests nothing to you? No, apparently it does not. Well, it so happens that I think I know the person you mean. He is indeed very arrogant and perhaps the time has come to humble him a little. If I understand you aright, you are angry because he does not speak to you?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I believe I shall loosen his tongue a little."

"What sort of punishment is that?" asked the Charcoal Burner. "I want you to make Blencathra fall on his head!"

Saint Oswald made a sound of irritation. "What do you know of it?" he said. "Believe me, I am a far better judge than you of how to hurt this man!"

As Saint Oswald spoke John Uskglass began to talk in a rapid and rather excited manner. This was unusual but did not at first seem sinister. All his courtiers and servants listened politely. But minutes went by — and then hours — and he did not stop talking. He talked through dinner; he talked through mass; he talked through the night. He made prophecies, recited Bible passages, told the histories of various fairy kingdoms, gave recipes for pies. He gave away political secrets, magical secrets, infernal secrets, Divine secrets, and scandalous secrets — as a result of which the Kingdom of Northern England was thrown into various political and theological crises. Thomas of Dundale and William of Lanchester begged and threatened and pleaded, but nothing they said could make the King stop talking. Eventually they were obliged to lock him in the little room at the top of the castle so that no one else could hear him. Then, since it was inconceivable that a king should talk without someone listening, they were obliged to stay with him, day after day. After exactly three days he fell silent.

Two days later he rode into the Charcoal Burner's clearing. He looked so pale and worn that the Charcoal Burner was in high hopes that Saint Oswald might have relented and pushed Blencathra on his head.

"What is it that you want from me?" asked John Uskglass, warily.

"Ha!" said the Charcoal Burner with triumphant looks. "Ask my pardon for turning poor Blakeman into a fish!"

A long silence.

Then with gritted teeth, John Uskglass asked the Charcoal Burner's pardon. "Is there any thing else you want?" he asked.

"Repair all the hurts you did me!"

Immediately the Charcoal Burner's stack and hut reappeared just as they had always been; the trees were made whole again; fresh, green leaves covered their branches; and a sweet lawn of soft grass spread over the clearing.

"Any thing else?"

The Charcoal Burner closed his eyes and strained to summon up an image of unthinkable wealth. "Another pig!" he declared.

John Uskglass was beginning to suspect that he had made a miscalculation somewhere — though he could not for his life tell where it was. Nevertheless he felt confident enough to say, "I will grant you a pig — if you promise that you will tell no one who gave it to you or why."

"How can I?" said the Charcoal Burner. "I do not know who you are. Why?" he said, narrowing his eyes. "Who are you?"

"No one," said John Uskglass quickly.

Another pig appeared, the very twin of Blakeman, and while the Charcoal Burner was exclaiming over his good fortune, John Uskglass got on his horse and rode away in a condition of the most complete mystification.

Shortly after that he returned to his capital city of Newcastle. In the next fifty or sixty years his lords and servants often reminded him of the excellent hunting to be had in Cumbria, but he was careful never to go there again until he was sure the Charcoal Burner was dead. †

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